



A Mother's Mission Turns Tragedy into a Warning About Distracted Driving and Rail Safety

Byline: Erin Kelly for the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association

Sandra LaRose knows how a brief moment of distraction can change multiple lives forever.

It was a sunny afternoon on August 16, 2018, and LaRose's teenage daughter, Kailynn Bursic-Panchuk, had finished her shift at the Pharmasave in Weyburn, SK, and called to say she was going to drive over to visit a friend.

After hours passed and Bursic-Panchuk hadn't returned home, LaRose sent a text asking where she was. Soon after, she got a message from one of her daughter's friends asking her to call a number she didn't recognize.

"At first, I thought nothing of it. And then something made me reconsider. So, I called it, and it was the RCMP. They said Kailynn had been in a collision," recalls LaRose.

RCMP officers told LaRose that her daughter was being airlifted to Regina. It was on the drive to the hospital from their farm near Tyvan that LaRose and her husband learned Bursic-Panchuk's car had been hit by a train.

"I wasn't sure what I was going to see when I got to the hospital. But she didn't have a mark on her, which, looking back now, is almost harder," says LaRose.

After five days in a coma, doctors said that Bursic-Panchuk would have no quality of life if she pulled through. On August 22, 2018, she was taken off life support and her family honoured her request to be an organ donor.

It was the day after her 17th birthday.

"Kailynn was a good kid, a hard worker, as we know farm kids are. She certainly wasn't scared of working on the farm. She had two jobs, she played volleyball, she was involved in drama and choir, and she was an honour roll student. She was a very well-rounded, smart, good kid," explains LaRose.

"That's why it was hard when I found out that the accident was because she had been distracted by her phone."

Police told LaRose that her daughter had Google Maps open and Snapchat notifications on her phone screen. The train crew said that Bursic-Panchuk, who was driving a standard transmission car that she'd gotten a couple of months earlier, was looking down at the



passenger seat when she drove into the path of a train that hit the passenger side of her car and tipped it sideways.

LaRose believes her daughter was looking down at her phone at the time of the accident to check if she'd made the correct turn to get to her friend's farm.

"Personally, I think she saw the train, because there is nothing to block her view out there. I think she saw the train but assumed it wasn't moving because it was only a small two-piece train," says LaRose.

The knowledge that the fatal collision was caused by distracted driving was a "hard pill to swallow" for LaRose. But even before the decision was made to end medical treatment, she says she knew she couldn't keep quiet about what happened; sharing the facts wouldn't change the outcome but it could help others.

"I could have not shared that she was on her phone and nobody would have known. But what good is that? It's not going to bring her back," says LaRose. "It was her fault and it was a mistake, but it's a mistake that can't be undone."

Since then, LaRose has become a rail safety ambassador with Operation Lifesaver, along with being involved with Saskatchewan Government Insurance as a safety advocate, and travels across the country speaking to students about how distracted driving ended her daughter's life far too early.

"Trains and phones don't mix. Trains, vehicles, and phones is an even worse combination. But it doesn't matter what you're driving — big, small, motorcycle, moped. Riding a bike? With your cell phone? It's the same thing," LaRose says.

"When I speak to the students, I want them to understand that any choice they make has a consequence, good or bad."

LaRose says that in certain areas, like where she lives in Saskatchewan, where many farms and homes are near railway tracks, complacency is a significant safety risk at railway crossings.

"Living near train tracks, you can become deaf to trains and that's dangerous. There are people who live along the tracks or have to cross the tracks frequently to get off their farm or out of town and they don't pay attention," she explains.

But on the flip side, she notes that rail safety is just as important in locales where trains are infrequent or not present at all.



According to Transport Canada, there are [43,065 kilometres](#) of railway tracks across the country, making it inevitable, says LaRose, that people will encounter a railway crossing at some point.

“In Newfoundland and Labrador and Prince Edward Island, where there are no trains, it’s even more important to educate about rail safety. Because individuals there, especially the youth, are not going to stay in one location forever,” LaRose says. “There is not a railway that does not intersect with a road, so as soon as they go somewhere else, if they don’t know how to be safe, they’re in trouble.”

Despite increased awareness of the dangers of distracted driving in general and higher fines in many provinces, it remains a substantial concern. Transport Canada’s National Collision Database indicates that distracted driving contributed to an estimated [22.5 per cent of fatal collisions and 25.5 per cent of serious injury collisions in 2021](#). What’s more, a 2022 survey found that [83 per cent of Canadian drivers](#) admitted to distracted driving, with 43 per cent confirming they have engaged in technology-related distractions, such as texting while driving.

“You can quit smoking, you can quit drinking, you can eat healthier, you can start exercising. And you can quit using your phone while you drive,” stresses LaRose.

“Kailynn didn’t wake up that morning and think ‘I’m going to drive in front of a train when I look down at my phone.’ But she intentionally looked down at her phone, and it ended everything for her and it changed everything for us.”

Though LaRose didn’t get to see her daughter graduate from high school and will never see her get married, start a career, or have children, Bursic-Panchuk lives on in the presentations that LaRose shares with thousands of students every year. And it’s an endeavour she’s committed to continuing to help prevent other families from experiencing similar tragedies.

“I know I will never be the same. I’m a completely different person than I was eight years ago, and there’s no way that you can’t be because it’s devastating and it’s life-changing,” says LaRose. “But if I can save one person at every presentation from making the same mistake, then I know Kailynn’s death can be turned into something of value.

“So put your safety first. Because in the blink of an eye, you could be gone.”

More information about LaRose’s safety presentation, which is suitable for Grades 7 to 12, is available at www.sandralarose.ca or by contacting sandra@sandralarose.ca.

About Kids FarmSafe Week



Kids FarmSafe Week is an annual public awareness campaign hosted by the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association to promote the safety and wellness of children and youth on Canadian farms. Now in its third year, Kids FarmSafe Week takes place May 11-17, 2026, and is presented by BASF Agricultural Solutions Canada Inc. More information can be found at www.kidsfarmsafe.ca.

About the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association

The Canadian Agricultural Safety Association (CASA) is a national, non-profit organization dedicated to improving the health and safety of farmers, their families and agricultural workers. CASA is funded in part by the Sustainable Canadian Agricultural Partnership. For more information, visit www.casa-acsa.ca.

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Images:

[Sandra LaRose](#)

[Kailynn Bursic-Panchuk](#)

Cutline: Sandra LaRose lost her 17-year-old daughter, Kailynn Bursic-Panchuk, following a collision with a train in August 2018 that was caused by distracted driving. Since then, LaRose has made it her mission to share her daughter's story and raise awareness about the dangers of distracted driving and the importance of rail safety.