

CHAPEL HILL NEWS

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'No good reason': Carrboro students learn dangers of drinking and driving

HIGHLIGHTS

Simulated crash brings home danger of drinking and driving

101 people killed in 2014 N.C. crashes involved 16- to 19-year-olds

Speaker: 'I watched my brother die on the side of the road.'



About 400 students learned the dangers of distracted driving and drinking and driving in a grisly simulated crash Friday, April 29, 2016, at Carrboro High School. The event, played out in real time, was organized by the SAVE (Students Against Violence Everywhere) chapters at East Chapel Hill High and Chapel Hill High and local emergency responders and agencies. From left: Chase Weeks, 18, as the driver, and Ana Ruiz-Perez, 17, as the witness who calls 911. "I actually was so mad at you," she told Weeks later. "It felt so real." **Mark Schultz** - mschultz@newsobserver.com

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CARBORO — It's not easy to get 400 high school students to be quiet.

It happened twice at Carrboro High School on Friday as juniors and seniors sat through a presentation on the dangers of drinking and driving and distracted driving.

The first speaker competed for attention in the auditorium.

But the buzz ended abruptly when a video showed a collision tossing bodies through a car like rag dolls. The young people in the car were not wearing seat belts.

Minutes later, students sat stone silent through a home video showing a little boy taking excited steps, growing into a handsome soccer player and college student.

The boy's father, Hans Vogel, stood behind the podium, just out of the spotlight.

"Sometimes I wonder who you would be today," a song played over the pictures.

Vogel reached into his pants pocket, pulled out a white tissue and wiped his cheek.

On the field

“Would you check in the warehouse and see if we have an amputated foot?” Kim Woodward, Orange County EMS operations manager, asked on the phone.

Woodward was preparing the football field for a mock crash.

The vehicles – a BMW crushed, a mini-van up-ended on its side – were already in place as Woodward applied make-up to students playing drivers and passengers in the accident.

In the scenario, a student who had been drinking and smoking marijuana, crashes with four of his friends on the way to an after-prom party. At least three people in the two vehicles are dead.

Three of the students will take places lying motionless on the field, where they have been ejected from the mini-van.

When the juniors and seniors fill the bleachers and the emergency workers lift the tarps on the vehicles a few minutes later, a girl in the back seat will be screaming.

How much faster?

Orange County Assistant District Attorney Jeff Nieman asked students in the auditorium a question.

On U.S. 15-501 through town, he asked, how much faster would you get from one point to another driving 10 miles over the speed limit? 20 miles over the speed limit?

“If you’re going over the speed limit, you don’t get there faster,” he said. “They tested it.”

Speeding up only forces you to brake for the inevitable light or the person ahead of you.

“It doesn’t get you anything except a ticket,” Nieman said.

And if you do get a ticket, “I’m the one in the courtroom who’ll be waiting for you,” he said. “And I’ll remember this talk.”

Friday’s presentation, timed for prom and graduation parties, encouraged students to make responsible decisions. Don’t drink and drive. Don’t drive when you’re tired. Don’t text, which is illegal, or even take your eyes off the road when you’re talking to your friends.

UNC Air Nurse Chris McGrath introduced himself by saying he picks people up off the pavement.

In 2014, he said, 101 people in North Carolina were killed in fatal crashes involving 16- to 19-year-olds.

There were 2,623 total deaths due to motor vehicle crashes. Drinking and driving factored in 30 percent of fatal crashes, and driving while tired is almost just as dangerous.

“People are making bad decisions,” McGrath said.

Like his brother. He took a girl on a motorcycle ride after drinking, and McGrath was one of the first responders.

“I watched my brother die on the side of the road,” he said, his voice breaking.

“And I don’t want anybody to have to go to your parents and tell them you died in an accident because of some ridiculous decision,” he said. “Don’t be that person.”

The scenario

Chase Weeks, 18, pushed open the mangled car door and staggered to his feet.

The police cruisers were already pulling up as the Carrboro High senior turned to see the bodies on the field, thrown from the mini-van he had hit on the way to the party.

Behind him, a girl lay sprawled across the BMW’s hood.

Carrboro firefighters used the jaws of life to saw off a back-seat door. They pulled out another girl, the one who had been screaming, and lay her on a stretcher as a UNC helicopter whirred overhead, kicking up dust.

A shoe with reddish-brown matter like hamburger meat lay on the pavement.

Weeks tottered as he tried to walk a straight line during a sobriety test. He kept holding his hands to his head, pushing back his long hair.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” he cried as a police officer handcuffed him.

A second helicopter arrived.

The officer grabbed Weeks’ arm and led him off the field.

Knocks on the door

Hans Vogel and his wife were awakened by knocks on the door at their Fayetteville home on May 29, 2005.

It was just a five-mile trip, but the driver had been drinking.

The car had swerved off a highway entrance ramp, partially ejecting their son Jackson, then crushing him as it turned over.

“The next time we saw him was on a funeral home gurney,” Vogel told the students.

“He was cold. He was silent. He was gone.”

Jackson was the oldest of the couple’s two sons. In one of the home video scenes, a tow-headed Jackson pets his baby brother’s head like a puppy.

The driver served 16 months for the fatal accident. Vogel said he, his wife and Jackson’s brother are serving a life sentence.

“I miss my son,” he said. “He should not be dead.”

“Jackson was a good person who died for no good reason.”

HOW BIG IS THE PROBLEM?

In 2013, 2,163 teens in the United States ages 16–19 were killed and 243,243 were treated in emergency departments for injuries suffered in motor vehicle crashes. That means that six teens ages 16–19 died every day from motor vehicle injuries.

The risk of motor vehicle crashes is higher among 16-19-year-olds than among any other age group. Per mile driven, teen drivers ages 16 to 19 are nearly three times more likely than drivers aged 20 and older to be in a fatal crash

Teens are more likely than older drivers to speed and allow shorter headways (the distance from the front of one vehicle to the front of the next).

Among male drivers between 15 and 20 years of age who were involved in fatal crashes in 2012, 35 percent were speeding at the time of the crash and 25% had been drinking.

Compared with other age groups, teens have the lowest rate of seat belt use. In 2013, only 55 percent of high school students reported they always wear seat belts when riding with someone else.

In a 2013 national survey, 22 percent of teens reported that, within the previous month, they had ridden with a driver who had been drinking alcohol. Among students who drove, 10 percent reported having driven after drinking alcohol within the same one-month period.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention