

DR. TRAFFIC

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Best prom attire keeps you alive: Seat belts

HIGHLIGHTS

Harding students want to save lives during spring celebrations after loss of friend, motivator

Keundra 'Keke' Smith wasn't wearing a seat belt when she died at 18



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Keundra "Keke" Smith's death in a crash in December 2015 inspired classmates at Harding University High School to speak up about the importance of wearing seat belts.

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Prom season is almost here. A group of students at Harding University High School is jumping out ahead of the celebrations with an important reminder: Seat belts save lives.

That's a good reminder for all of us, but especially for newer drivers. Once spring is here, we all tend to feel a little more carefree. Parties and graduations can add to those feelings. Maybe someone doesn't buckle up.

So here's one more reminder: More than 1,400 teens ages 16 to 20 died in 2012 in crashes and related incidents, according to the [National Highway Safety Administration](#). At least 55 percent of those teens were not wearing seat belts.

The faculty at Harding typically brings a crashed car on campus ahead of its prom in May, as a reminder about what can happen on the road.

But last year Harding lost one of its own in a wreck just a few days before Christmas. Keundra "Keke" Smith, 18, wasn't wearing a seat belt when the vehicle her cousin was driving ran off a road in Greenville County, S.C. The vehicle hit several cars and rolled over, investigators said.

The popular girl known for her engaging smile was gone. Harding senior Sharnice White said she also lost a motivator and someone who showed how much she cared.

"If you were in her presence, whether you knew her or not, she was going to push you to do your work, come to school, just make the best decisions possible," said Sharnice, 17, president of the 12-member [Students Against Violence Everywhere](#) chapter at Harding.

Suddenly White and many classmates connected in a different way to those messages about safe driving.

The group is planning a special message for SAVE's annual youth summit on March 12 in Raleigh. They want to share Keundra's story with other student leaders to prevent losses like theirs.

"It doesn't happen in just one city," Sharnice said. "Before someone's parents or friends have to go through this ... don't wait until a tragedy has happened to start doing the right thing."

During Harding's presentation, students who attend the conference will hear teen crash statistics and letters from Keundra's mother and the cousin who was driving when she died. They also will see Keundra's senior exit video.

"I was so impressed that this was their idea, coming from the students instead of adults trying to push it," said Marcia Jeter, a Harding teacher and adviser to SAVE students.

Their message is about loss but also about hope. Seat belts saved an estimated 12,174 lives in 2012, according to the National Highway Safety Administration, and probably a similar number every year since.

Included are friends, classmates, sisters, brothers and children whose survival gives many of us a reason to celebrate life this year.

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