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Students shown mock crash scene as pre-prom reminder to drive safely



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The Herald-Sun | Whitney Keller Jenny Suwanmanee, a junior at East Chapel Hill High School, pretends to be a victim of a drunk driving car crash during a mock crash on East Chapel Hill's football field on April 14, 2016.

CHAPEL HILL — Sirens blared as ambulances raced around East Chapel Hill High's track Thursday morning, on their way to a mock car crash set up on the football field — a reminder to students that the circumstances could be all too real.

The scenario, put on every other year by the student club Students Against Violence Everywhere, teaches juniors and seniors — students old enough to have a driver's license — about the dangers of distracted driving.

It was a timely lesson for the Wildcats as they prepare for prom this Saturday.

The driver that caused Thursday's mock crash was driving while impaired, but Jim Wise, the club's adviser, said the organization also wanted to warn against other forms of distracted driving, such as texting while driving or falling asleep at the wheel.

"Anything that kind of degrades your ability to be a good driver is something we want you to be thinking about," Wise said.

Chris McGrath, a nurse at Carolina Air Care who spoke to the students at an assembly before the crash, agreed.

"Driving while you're tired kills almost as many people as driving drunk does," he told the students.

McGrath preached against what he called "destructive decisions."

He showed a photo of an ATV crash scene in which one victim died and one victim was put on a respirator for the rest of his life.

"Neither one of these kids went to prom," he said. "Neither of them graduated from high school. Neither had the opportunity to go to college or trade school...Everyone in this room has the opportunity to think before they act."

McGrath also shared statistics: In 2014, 101 people were killed in crashes involving teenagers. Over the past five years, 63 teens in Orange County were killed in car crashes. Over the same time period, 800 teens were killed statewide.

But the statistics hit home for some when they saw the crash scenario.

The scene was familiar at first — two carloads of teenagers on their way to parties after prom. But then it turned gruesome as the two cars reportedly hit on the intersection of Weaver Dairy Road and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

Students listened as the mock 911 call was played over the loudspeakers, and the student actors began to scream and cry as they assessed the damage. One girl had lost her foot, and another had come through the windshield and suffered a severe head injury.

First responders from several agencies — including Orange County Emergency Services and both the Chapel Hill and Carrboro fire departments — worked to get into the cars and stabilize the injured passengers.

Officers from the Chapel Hill Police Department dealt with the driver who was suspected to be impaired, administering a sobriety test and eventually arresting her.

Senior Liz McEntee became emotional after the scene had concluded and students were allowed to come up and survey the damage.

“Seeing this — I had to look away for half of it,” she said.

For McEntee, situations like this are personal. Before she was born, her grandmother and her uncle were killed in a car crash. It was suspected that the 16-year-old driver in the other car fell asleep behind the wheel.

McEntee said she’s seen what the crash has done to her family, and now that she has her license, she offers rides to friends who need a safe way to get home, regardless of the time of night.

She said she will be driving her prom group and will make sure everyone gets home safely.

But McEntee agreed the lesson was about more than drinking and driving.

“I don’t want to just focus on alcohol and driving,” she said. “I have no doubt in my mind that the effects of this crash would have been the same whether it was sleeping at the wheel or another kind of distracted driving.”

Even those who acted in the scenario were affected by the gravity of the situation.

Lizeth Martinez, who played the drunk driver, called the display “really powerful.”

“It really made me feel in character and I felt really, really guilty,” she said.

A similar assembly and crash scenario will also be shown at the other area high schools — it will come to Carrboro High Friday, April 29 and to Chapel Hill High Friday, May 13.