

Law enforcement helping Manning teens to be Alive @ 25



Clarendon County Sheriff's Deputy Freddie Huth worked with 32 Manning High School students on Thursday during the school's first Alive at 25 course.

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MANNING - It was a game of Tic-Tac-Toe students at Manning High School had never played before.

Several of the 32 students chosen for a special driving class provided by the Clarendon County Sheriff's Department and the 3rd Circuit Alcohol Enforcement Team were handed a pair of "drunk goggles" and asked to place their team's mark in the familiar Tic-Tac-Toe grid. By the fourth turn either team could have won easily, but the hazy spectacles kept players from seeing clearly.

"The goggles show the students what it's like to be impaired by alcohol or other substances," said 3rd Circuit AET Coordinator Sharmane Anderson, who facilitated the Alive at 25 program for Manning High School's drivers' education class along with Deputy Freddie Huth on Thursday.

Developed by the National Safety Council, the survival course was implemented throughout South Carolina in 2007 to prevent what the program identifies as the No. 1 killer of teens: automobile crashes. Its purpose is to educate drivers ages 15 to 25 who are most at risk for fatal accidents.

"S.C. Alive at 25 is taught by off-duty deputy sheriffs, municipal police officers and S.C. Highway Patrol officers," reads the program website. "The course is delivered in one 4.5-hour program which focuses on the behaviors, decision-making and risks facing young drivers every time they get behind the wheel."

Since South Carolina's program kicked off in 2007, the state's death toll among drivers 15-24 has dropped by 38 percent, Anderson said. Clarendon County, unfortunately, has not seen such a decrease, Anderson said. While her team began looking into the program when it was first implemented statewide, the cost has been somewhat prohibitive to applying the lessons throughout the county. Before Thursday's class, the program had only been offered once before at Scott's Branch High School in Summerton.

"For this class, we were able to get a partnership to pay the cost, which is about \$30 per student for the materials," Anderson said. "We also partnered with organizations to hold the class at Scott's Branch High in (2008)."

Anderson said the team's efforts to implement the plan county-wide at all high schools could be helped along by a statewide effort to make the course mandatory for all driver's education courses.

"Right now, lawmakers are working on making a program like this mandatory for students who are going to be driving to and from school," Anderson said. "We feel like that will help us get to all the students who need a course like this. We've had too many fatalities in the past few years to ignore what a program like this could do for Clarendon County."

Clarendon County had eight automobile fatalities in 2010 among kids ages 15-25, all of which happened with someone from the target age group behind the wheel.

Huth told the 32 students gathered in the Manning High School lecture room on Thursday that careless and reckless driving for one second can cause a fatal wreck.

"The key to being a safe driver is, first of all, minimizing distractions," he said. "Everyone in your car is a potential distraction."

Huth listed variables like medication, texting while driving and talking on the phone as some of the leading causes of traffic fatalities among young drivers.

"This class isn't about teaching them how to drive," Huth said. "This is not about the fact that our children don't know how to stop at a stop sign or to yield at a yield sign. This is more about driving behaviors than mechanics."

Those behaviors - and their consequences - are explored in-depth through a combination of subject discussions and interactive lessons, including risk identification, interactive video participation, experience sharing with peers, role-playing in various driving situations and reviewing local laws. Thursday's class for the Manning High students also included the aforementioned safety goggles.

"It's a way to show them the dangers of driving with that kind of impairment, and they see how difficult it is to play Tic-Tac-Toe on a white board," Huth said. "If it's that difficult to play a game on a white board where you're standing still, it's that much harder to be able to drive in those conditions."