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Keeping the roads safe

By Shannon Brigham
STAFF WRITER

Matthew Linder knows the rules of the road, but the Spartanburg teenager admitted he hasn't always obeyed all of them. He said he's had a bad habit of speeding.

"Not really bad, though — you know, just showing out sometimes," he said.

While taking a required defensive driving class at his high school, he watched a video of real footage of the aftermath of automobile accidents involving young adults his age.

"It was pretty rough," he said, "but it was a good thing because that's about the only way you can get the point across sometimes."

Now 17, Linder said he's glad he took the class because he feels it helped him change his penchant for speeding.

He said he doesn't want to end up like the kids on that video.

Vehicle crashes are the No. 1 cause of death for people ages of 16 – 24, said Brooke Russell, executive director of the South Carolina National Safety Council.

South Carolina is ranked No. 6 when it comes to teen traffic fatalities, she said. In 2007, 244 people ages 15 – 25 died in car accidents in South Carolina, she said, and there were 315 deaths 2006.

The National Safety Council, a nonprofit organization that focuses on driver improvement training, developed a program called Alive at 25 to specifically target drivers in this age group. The program was introduced in South Carolina last year.

To date, 7,500 people have taken the course throughout the state, according to Russell.

It is a highly interactive 4½-hour course taught by off-duty law enforcement officers.

Rather than teaching the mechanics of driving, it focuses more on behaviors, peer pressure and habits. The focus is to help educate young drivers to adopt safer driving practices and to take responsibility for their behaviors.

"The whole program is about making good decisions and knowing the consequences if you make poor decisions," Russell said. "Our goal is to have them to learn why they are killing themselves and why they are at risk."

Currently, 35 agencies throughout the state have instructors who can teach the Alive at 25 program, Russell said. And 16 schools throughout South Carolina offer the Alive at 25 program to students, some as a requirement to drive on campus.

Lt. Crystal Kingsmore of the Spartanburg County Sheriff's Office teaches the class in Spartanburg.

"We actually look at some of the driving behaviors of others that have resulted in crashes and discuss the statutes and laws that were broken," she said. "And then talk about if they were in that situation what would they do to gain control of the situation."

The program uses role-playing, videos and discussions of real scenarios to drive points home.

“You’d be surprised at what they bring to the table,” she said of the teens she has taught. Some have lost friends or family members in car crashes and are able to offer their stories to the class discussion.

Kingsmore uses experiences she’s had as a police officer to show students what can happen as a result of making bad decisions.

“We have witnessed accidents, dealt with accidents and written tickets to teens their age,” she said. “I don’t get any attention from them until I bring in the personal stories.”

Classes are offered three times a month in the Spartanburg and Greenville areas, Russell said.

“I think everybody should take it,” Linder said. “Just the fact that people our age — young drivers — need to pay more attention.”

Additional Facts

DRIVING FACTS

- Traffic crashes are the leading cause of teen fatalities, accounting for 44 percent of teen deaths in the U.S.
- Young drivers are involved in fatal crashes at more than twice the rate of all others.
- The first year for a newly licensed teenage driver is the most dangerous with more than one in five involved in crashes.
- Each year nearly 6,000 teens in the nation are killed in vehicular accidents; more than 3,800 are drivers age 15 – 20.
- Annually, more than 326,000 young drivers are seriously injured
- 244 young drivers in 2007 were killed in vehicle collisions in South Carolina.
- Exceeding the posted speed limit or driving at an unsafe speed is the most common error in fatal teenage accidents.
- More than 1,000 young drivers lose their lives each year in crashes because of an impaired driver, be it themselves or someone else.
- Young drivers are involved in nearly 28 percent of all crashes, even though they represent only 15 percent of the nations’ licensed drivers.

SOURCE: National Safety Council, www.nsc.org.