

Alive at 25 garners local support

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On an early Summer morning in 2005, Phillip Bryan Gamble of Manning was killed when the 2000 Jeep Cherokee he was driving ran off the right side of the road on S.C. 261, struck a ditch and flipped several times, ejecting the 19-year-old.

More than a year later, Amanda Logan, also 19, was driving west on Pearson Road when she ran a stop sign and crashed her 2004 Volkswagen into the side of a Chevrolet van driven by Williene Wright of Summerton. Robertha Lawson, 71, of Manning, a passenger in the van, died later at Tuomey Regional Medical Center.

These wrecks, like many others involving drivers between the ages of 15 and 24, are senseless and tragic.

According to Brooke Russell, executive director of the National Safety Council's South Carolina Chapter, they are also avoidable.

Russell was on hand at Clarendon Behavioral Health Services on Dec. 12 to discuss "Alive at 25," a program being used at 10 high schools throughout the state and even more across the United States to curb fatalities among drivers 15 to 24.

"This is a program that has been operating for 13 years, but it's only been around for one in South Carolina," she said.

Initiated at Dutch Fork High School after the school suffered six fatalities in one school year, the program is gaining momentum across the state and Alcohol Enforcement Team Coordinator Sharmane Anderson said she is interested in getting the program for the Third Judicial Circuit, which includes Clarendon, Lee, Sumter and Williamsburg counties.

"We want to look into this as making a first step to making Clarendon County better," she said.

"This program is setting Lexington and Richland (counties) on fire and we want to get this set up in Clarendon County and model it for other counties," Russell said.

Taught in a 4 1/2 -hour session, the course accepts drivers between the ages of 15 and 24, but organizers would prefer to get these drivers when they're teenagers to have maximum effect. The mission of this class is to help them act responsibly behind the wheel.

"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," Russell said. "This is more about driving behaviors than mechanics."

Those behaviors and their consequences, she said, are explored in-depth through a combination of subject discussions and interactive teaching tools, including risk identification, interactive video participation, experience sharing with peers, role-

playing in various driving situations and reviewing local laws.

The class is divided into four parts and taught by trained law enforcement officers.

"Who better to train our young people than the folks that serve and protect them," Russell said. "Not only does this help the teens learn the material better, but it fosters a relationship with the police force."

According to Russell, teens comprise about 28 percent of the U.S. driving force while those 18 to 24 serve as 28 percent of all crashes, fatal or otherwise. As of three weeks ago, 225 deaths out of the 1,000 fatalities this year were teenagers. Only 10 percent of those were wearing a seatbelt.

"You see a lot of the tragedies on television when they're happening, like the shooting at Virginia Tech," Russell said. "I don't mean to downplay that incident, but to compare numbers, every day 33 people in this age group die in a crash in the United States. The impact just isn't the same, however, because they're not in the same area."

She said many of the 10 high schools offering the program have made the course mandatory for their students in order to drive to school.

"These days, nine out of 10 students drive to school," she said.

Devon Hughes of the Lexington County Sheriff's Department serves as a coordinator for Alive at 25 and says that teen fatalities are an epidemic with South Carolina ranked sixth in the country and Columbia itself ranked the worst driving city in the country.

"A lot of times when the kids come into the program, you find that they don't think about the people affected by their driving habits," she said. "They don't think about the parents, the siblings, the friends and how they might feel should that teen die in an accident. Yeah, we emphasize the criminal and civil consequences, but we also emphasize the emotional ones."

Anderson was unsure as to when the program could be implemented in the county and surrounding areas, but Russell said that the process is easy and that an officer in Sumter is already trained to teach the program.

"Our goal next year is to be in every judicial circuit," she said. "We have had a principal from a school ask us about the program and had it set up in two working days."

Sheila Floyd, interim superintendent of Clarendon County School District 3, was present to hear about the program, saying she thinks it will be something positive for her schools.

"I'm very interested in it and I had some prior information due to a story they had done on the (television) news," she said. "Anything that makes our children safer is something we're interested in and want to look into further."

She said if she's still serving in the position by the school board meeting in January, she'd recommend the board look further into the program.

"...I intend to have it on the agenda for the January meeting if I'm still interim superintendent then or at least suggest it be on the agenda..."

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