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Alive at 25 teaches teen drivers responsibility

SUMMERTON – Scott’s Branch High School senior Danielle Brailsford, like most kids in high school, was excited about driving, even if only to school and back. But she was even more serious about learning how to be safe while driving.

The 17-year-old has heard all of the horror stories, including the statistic that drivers between the ages of 15 and 24 have the highest rates of wrecks. So when Brailsford had the chance to be a part of the initial Alive at 25 class offered at her school on a recent Saturday morning, she was ready to learn.

“I came because I want to enhance my driving skills,” she said during a break in the class, which was offered Nov. 9 at the school. “I had heard about it through my friends and I wanted to come and learn about the different hazards and how to handle them.”

Although only recently offered in this area, Alive at 25 began less than one year ago when Brooke Russell, executive director of the National Safety Council’s South Carolina Chapter, spoke to a packed room at Clarendon Behavioral Health Service.

At that time, the program was being used at 10 high schools throughout the state 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,” Russell said.

Initiated at Dutch Fork High School after the school suffered six fatalities in one school year, the program was one which Alcohol Enforcement Team Coordinator Sharmane Anderson wanted for the Third Judicial Circuit, which includes Clarendon, Lee, Sumter and Williamsburg counties.

“(I) consider this as a first step to making Clarendon County better,” she said at least year’s meeting.

The Scott’s Branch class, like most Alive at 25 sessions, took about five hours to teach the 15 students.

But the children aren’t learning how to drive.

“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 – 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.

The class was divided into four parts and taught by trained law enforcement officers from the circuit, including Wardell Cooper of the Clarendon County Sheriff’s Department; Sgt. George McConico, Scott’s Branch High School resource officer; and Lt. Terrance Colclough of the Sumter County Sheriff’s Department.

“We had a great class here today,” Colclough said. “The kids were every attentive. We couldn’t

ask for more.”

McConico led most of the instruction, which included group work that involved figuring out the solution to a peer-pressure scenario.

“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 licensed drivers in the United States while that same age group contributes to the same percent of crashes, fatal or otherwise.

“You see a lot of tragedies on television when they’re happening, like the shooting at Virginia Tech (in April 2007),” Russell said last year. “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 all in the same area.”

With nine out of 10 students driving to school on South Carolina roads each day, Russell said that many of the schools offering the program have made it mandatory. It hasn’t gotten that far in Clarendon County yet, but with South Carolina being ranked sixth in the country for teen driving fatalities, Devon Hughes of the Lexington County Sheriff’s Department said it might not be a bad idea to mandate the course eventually.

“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.”

Brailsford herself was more concerned about the pressure applied to her when her friends ride with her.

“I wanted to learn how to handle the peer pressure from my friends while I’m driving,” she said, mentioning her friends asking her to turn the radio up or drive faster. “I’ve had my license for about six months now and I didn’t know a lot of the stuff they’re talking about.”

Russell said for some, it’s as simple as telling them to put on their seatbelts while driving and asking passengers to do the same.

Brailsford definitely got the message.

“I think I will be cautious of others,” she said “While I know it’s not always me that will make a driving mistake, I know that I can control what I do. Watching my speed and wearing my seatbelt are also important.”

Fellow senior Kendra Gipson, 17, agreed.

“I like that this class has told me how to be a defensive driver,” she said. “I’m really glad I came.”

National Safety Council, in cooperation with the Allstate Foundation, also offers scholarships to drivers who require financial assistance. Sponsorship registration forms are available from the SCNSC by calling (803)-732-6778 or you may visit their website at www.scnsc.org.