

Program shows young drivers that they aren't invincible

Published Monday July 9 2007

By **LORI YOUNT**
lyount@beaufortgazette.com
843-986-5531

Halfway through a defensive driving course, at least two of the participants were in tears. Clearly, this was not the average class that drivers take to atone for speeding tickets or to get an insurance discount.

Instead, "Alive at 25" targets people ages 16 to 24, a group most at risk of being involved in car crashes, and exposes them to graphic images and stories of the results of reckless driving. It's open and available to anyone in Beaufort, Jasper, Allendale, Colleton or Hampton counties.

"This program gives the young people who feel invincible behind the wheel of a car a reality check," said 14th Judicial Circuit Solicitor Duffie Stone, who attended the program's debut four-hour course last week in Beaufort County.

"Looking at the faces of those young people, it certainly makes a difference."

The Solicitor's Office organized the nationally renowned program in the Lowcountry after the state this year required a traffic component for the office's Alcohol Education Program. That program gives first-time offenders charged with various alcohol-related misdemeanors -- not including driving under the influence -- a chance to expunge their records.

The Alcohol Education Program participants are required to take the defensive driving course, but Stone said he decided to open it to the public for \$35 per person after Solicitor's Office employees and police previewed the program.

"It made that much of an impact on people who saw it that they wanted to get their children in there," he said.

The class is taught by two Beaufort police officers and includes videos of car crashes, wearing goggles that mimic drug or alcohol impairment and reminders of traffic rules.

"I learned something," said Heather Strickland of the Solicitor's Office. "It's very interactive."

Strickland said interest from the public has been high, and Colleton County High School in Walterboro is considering requiring the course before students can receive school parking permits.

Those interested should sign up quickly, though. The first class was standing-room only, and the courses through the end of the year are filling up, she said.

Participants should check with their insurance company to see if a discount is offered for the course, Strickland said.