



Continental helps fight the number one killer of teens with education.

What is the number one killer of teens? Is it drugs or alcohol? Is it violence or suicide? Is it cancer or juvenile diabetes? Surprisingly, it's none of these. It's a task that we do daily. It's a task that is so engrained in our lives, that it often seems routine and effortless; we forget how complex and scary this task was the first time we tried it. So what is this activity that has claimed the lives of so many of our teenagers? It's driving.

Two schools in Fort Mill, S.C., took notice of the epidemic, and they decided they had to do something about it. In 2007 and 2008, Nations Ford High School and Fort Mill High School took part in a one-day course to educate teen drivers about safe driving techniques in hopes that more students would be accident-free and "alive at 25."

The course, named Alive at 25, is a national program developed by the National Safety Council and taught by off-duty deputy sheriffs and municipal police officers. Alive at 25 is delivered in a one four-hour session, and focuses on the behaviors and decision-making processes that young drivers and passengers display behind the wheel.

Steve Deibel, South Carolina Alive at 25 instructor and coordinator, said the course is based on teaching students the behaviors of driving, not the mechanics. According to Deibel, youth aged 15 to 24 make up 14 percent of all drivers on the road, and they are also the most at-risk group for automobile accidents.

During the course, instructors hold candid conversations with students about what can happen if they practice risky behavior or make other poor decisions in an automobile. They discuss driving with a carload of friends, and how one brief second of inattention can be deadly. Students also learn about the dangers of texting and using cell phones and mp3 players while driving. Initially, the program began as a voluntary class, with few students enrolled, but after the shocking death of two Nations Ford students in the fall of 2009, that changed.

Following the deaths of the two students who died within a week of each other, the class became a requirement for any student who wanted an on-campus parking pass, either at Nations Ford or Fort Mill high schools. The cost of the class — \$35 per student — became a concern for a number of parents. Then, Continental Tire the Americas (CTA) stepped in, donating \$14,000 that would allow approximately 400 students to take the course free-of-charge.

"This is just one way that Continental Tire can give something back to our local community," said Matthias Schoenberg, CTA chief executive officer. "Our hearts go out to the families who have lost children to automobile wrecks, and we sincerely hope this program will help prevent any more needless and tragic deaths."

CTA also announced that it will continue its sponsorship into the 2011 school year.

According to Deibel, students and adults alike can make the roads a safer place for us all by following several rather obvious — but often ignored — rules of thumb:

- 1) Cut down your speed. The number one violator of speeding is the 14 to 24 age group, and it's a dangerous habit to acquire.
- 2) Remove alcohol from the equation. Alcohol impairs cognitive and motor skills, and can slow a driver's reaction time in a tight situation. Make the right decision and select a designated driver, ask a family member to pick you up or call a cab.
- 3) Put down your cell phone. It's the number one cause of distraction when driving. Text your friend when you get home, call them when you're no longer behind the wheel — whoever the caller is, whatever the situation is, it's not more important than your safety.
- 4) Buckle up. It's the quickest, easiest thing you can do and it can save your life. If being "cool" is the issue, consider this: Wearing a seat belt is far cooler than being ejected head-first from a moving vehicle.

"One of the key things we work on in the classroom is showing students that their choices have consequences. And these consequences don't just affect them, but all the people around them too," said Deibel. "If you choose to do 80 on a back country road drinking and not wearing a seat belt, and your car goes airborne and you're ejected from the vehicle, you're probably going to die. And while that was your choice, your family and friends also have to suffer the consequences."

According to state-wide statistics, the program has seen great success. Since it began in South Carolina in 2007, the state has seen a steady reduction of automobile-related fatalities in the 15 to 24 age group. The state of Colorado has participated in the program for several years and has also seen a drastic reduction in youth fatalities on the road.

"We've got to get our young people thinking about it and their parents talking about it," urged Deibel of safe driving education. "Keep it fresh and remind them constantly that if they slow down, wear a seat belt and eliminate distractions, they can make a huge difference and beat the odds."

For more information about the Alive at 25 program, visit their national website at www.aliveat25.us and the South Carolina site at www.scaliveat25.org.