

lowcountry parent & family life



Reality check

The Alive at 25 program aims to lower teen driving fatalities through driver improvement training

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Katelyn Miller, 16, of Hanahan and Mike McCurdy, director of operations at 911 Driving School in Mount Pleasant talk about some of the bad habits teens often have in conjunction with driving.

Katelyn Miller, 16, of Hanahan, knows the laws of the road.

She usually obeys the rules, but admits sometimes when she's running late for cheerleading, she has tried to make up the time by speeding a little.

In the end, she is aggravated, stressed out and often still late to practice.

Miller recently learned through a new teen defensive driving course that she can't make time up on the road. She realized she is responsible for her passengers' safety as well as her own. And she has made seat belt use non-negotiable.

"Not only is their life in danger, but if we get in a wreck they can also hit me and put my life in danger," she said. "I never thought about that."

And she's right.

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.

Mike McCurdy, director of operations at 911 Driving School in Mount Pleasant, is a certified instructor of the class. He has 26 years in law enforcement and is a father of three.

Want to take a class?

Alive at 25 classes cost \$35. The Allstate Foundation granted \$50,000 to Alive at 25 to pay for scholarships for those who can't afford the class. To learn more call 800-733-6185 or visit SCALiveat25.org

As a police officer, McCurdy has seen the same types of problems with over and over. Most, he said, are caused by a lack of driving experience. The class gives young drivers the tools they need to be more responsible, he said.

"We're trying to keep them alive long enough for them to get the experience and not get themselves injured or killed doing it," he said.

McCurdy believes being police officers lends a sense of credibility to instructors. He shares true stories of his experiences in law enforcement, which helps kids listen and learn.

"He told stories and I knew he wasn't making it up," Miller said. "They helped me put it into perspective and just imagine that it was my friends. It was really cool."

Classes utilize videos and discussions of real-life scenarios to drive home points.

"I don't just stand up and say, 'This is what happens to kids,'" he said. "It's better to say 'This is what happened, and this is why it happened.'"

Miller said she has changed her own habits since taking the course.

"Little things we joke around about, like texting and driving, or stuff we do every day that we don't pay attention to," she said. "He told us a lot of stories about how that has killed people and how they think it's cool. When our friends play around with us in the car we think it's fun and games, but it really does affect the way we drive and puts not only ourselves in danger, but also every one else around us."

She said she has now taken control.

"We can have fun in the car, but to a minimum," she said. "We don't have to go crazy and jam the music. We can listen to music and have fun, but all in a good way."

Katelyn's father, Chesteen, sat with his daughter in the class. He said McCurdy taught the same things he teaches, but from a different perspective. Like other parents of teens, he worries about his daughter driving, and he was impressed by what McCurdy said.

"He told them to pay attention to everything that's going on around you because you may not be the bad driver, it may be someone else around you," he said. "I worry only because she's young. I don't think they're really developed enough at 15, 16 years old to get behind the wheel of a car and do things we're doing at an older age."

Miller rides with his daughter frequently and critiques her driving skills. He also talks to her about what she's doing in the car.

Although parents aren't required to take the class with their children, he said he's glad he sat in because it opened dialogue with his daughter about her driving habits.

"I recommend every teen in the United States take this class," he said.

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