

Students study the science of alcohol abuse

By SUSAN THACKER, Great Bend Tribune

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Simulated Driver – Matthew Atkinson, a Barton County Community College automotive student from Great Bend High School, steers the Save-A-Life Drinking and Driving simulator Thursday, Sept. 21, in Barton's Student Union while instructor Brian Beldyga provides information. A multimillion dollar computerized machine that simulates impaired driving, the simulator was sponsored by the Cougar Prevention Program and the Peer Educators.

The student behind the wheel was doing his best not to speed or swerve after drinking several beers, but he wasn't ready for the truck that pulled out in front of him. It seemed to come out of nowhere. As the driver hit the brakes and wrenched the steering wheel to the left, his car skidded out of control.

Students at Barton County Community College experienced the devastating effects of drinking and driving on Thursday when the National Make a Difference "Save A Life" Tour brought its Drinking and Driving Simulator to the Student Union.

Students who listened to Brian Beldyga's lecture on the effects of alcohol were invited to "drive" along 87 miles of roadway, projected on a video screen with a 180-degree field of vision and random traffic and weather conditions.

Participants began the experience "sober," but as the simulation continued, their reaction time was slowed at a rate corresponding to an increased level of virtual intoxication. Ongoing multi-media presentations and an actual casket were also part of the display, intended to bring home the permanent and life-changing impact of

drinking and driving, sponsors said.

"One beer and your brain starts to shut down," Beldyga said. "You lose the ability to multi-task. You lose 10 percent of your peripheral vision."

Beldyga asked students to guess the percentage of fatal drunk-driving accidents caused by the driver swerving. Most guessed the number to be 50 percent or more, but the actual number is only 15 percent. It's a common misconception, he said. One of the first things an intoxicated driver concentrates on is maintaining the lane, but in doing so, the driver's ability to concentrate on the rest of the road is impaired.

This was the second year for Save a Life to bring its program to Barton. It was one of several programs organized by Barton Prevention Coordinator Jason Halling.

For the past several weeks, approximately 350 students learned to develop teamwork and leadership skills by attending the Adventure Based Leadership Education course at Camp Aldrich. In addition to the traditional ABLE course that involves working as a team to get through obstacles, student also received TIP instruction — Training for Intervention Procedures.

"TIP gives you the science behind alcohol abuse and what it does to you," Halling said.

The class also provided advice for how to intervene in real-life situations — for example, what to do if a friend drinks too much and passes out.

"We're seeing growth in the binge-drinking culture," Halling said of U.S. college campuses.

The prevention program trains students to be proactive peer educators. The TABLE (TIP + ABLE) training was provided to every athletic team on campus, as well as other performance groups such as band, choir, dance, cheer/yell leaders and ag students — in fact, any student who receives a performance scholarship at Barton. The college is in the second year of a two-year prevention grant that made the training possible, but Halling said it wouldn't have happened without the support of Athletic Director Kurt Kohler and music directors Vern Fryberger and Steve Lueth.

Several staff members at the college helped provide the TABLE training, including Halling, Kohler, Jim Ireland, Dan McFadden, Louis Ochoa, Kala Steffen, Patrick Busch and Curtis Wolf. When the prevention grant ends next June, these employees will still be available as resources in prevention efforts, Halling said.