

Drunk'd

JMU Students Get A Safe, But Scary, Look At Driving Under The Influence

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HARRISONBURG - For about four hours on Tuesday afternoon, dozens of James Madison University students were driving drunk on campus - and everybody was OK with it.

But that was probably because it was just pretend.

From 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., students took a spin on a drunken driving simulator called the "Save A Life Tour, a High Impact Alcohol Awareness Program." The system uses 10 computers and five big screens to make drivers think and feel like they are driving while intoxicated.

The students swerved and skidded through all kinds of traffic and weather as the computer steadily increased the alcohol content, slowing their responses. They turned the steering wheel and hit the brakes, but the car took up to a second to respond.

"Oh gosh, oh gosh, oh gosh!" yelled Samantha Hodgdon, 18, of Stratham, N.H., as she gripped the wheel and slammed on the brakes. "I'm getting dizzy!"

Her boyfriend, Tom Bresnahan, 18, of Toms River, N.J., encouraged her.

"Try to take a right," he said. "Try to turn if you can."

But with the DUI indicator at the program's max, Hodgdon skidded around the corner, overcompensated and landed on the sidewalk. It wasn't long before her car was in the grass and the simulation was over.

"This was scary," she said. "I can't imagine that there are people who drive like that. I had no control."

Tuesday's event wasn't without actual injury.

Rashaunda Jackson, an 18-year-old freshman from Dinwiddie County, broke her nail when her steering wheel jiggled after she hit the curb.

"I was hitting the brake but the car wouldn't stop," Jackson said. "I was like, 'Why is the screen still moving! My car's still going!' I look like I've been in a real-life accident."

How It Works

That was just the response that the program's workers had in mind.

The system works by using a verity of scare tactics, workers explained. First, they show a graphic 12-minute video that shows actual footage from wrecks caused by drunken drivers. Included in the display are banners and a coffin. "The Party's Over. Forever" reads one banner.

After that, the crew turns on the simulator for anyone who walks by.

Although the equipment looks like a high-tech arcade game, the car feels real, students said.

Three screens, complete with working rear- and side-view mirrors, simulate an 80-square-mile city, workers said. The streets and buildings are patterned after a mixture of several Michigan cities.

The interior of the car is modeled after a Ford Crown Victoria.

The company tours three systems across the nation five days a week, said Chris Geysbeek, a tour manager, whose friend was killed as the result of a drunken driver. Between the three tours, the company makes about 700 stops annually at high schools, colleges, military bases and community centers.

University Program Board co-sponsored the event with the University Health Center.

"Hopefully, this changes things," said Chace Ganey, 21, of Richmond, who crashed into a car during the simulation.