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Simulator tests drunken drivers cold sober

Students amazed how reaction times decline as alcohol levels rise

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MONMOUTH - Until someone close to him died at the hands of a drunken driver, Brian Beldyga thought he personally had mastered drinking and driving.

"I was pretty much a worst-case scenario with alcohol," he said while visiting Monmouth College on Thursday. "No one was really going to tell me anything different; I thought I was really good at it."

Now Beldyga, of Grand Rapids, Mich., has devoted his life to encouraging college students across the country to avoid getting behind the wheel after consuming alcohol.

Beldyga was in Monmouth for a stop on the "Save a Life" tour, highlighted by a drunken-driving simulator that shows how alcohol can impair motor skills and reaction times.

"Life changes really quickly," Beldyga said. "I was the bullheaded person, the person that made jokes about machines like this."

The simulated car has three video screens that have a 185-degree view, similar to a windshield. Monmouth students climbed into the machine one by one Thursday as the car seat measured their weight and their blood-alcohol level mechanically began to climb.

As the levels climbed, so did the machine-generated delay in reaction times.

"For the first time, from a sober angle, you'll see how impacted your motor skills and reaction times can be," Beldyga said.

The maximum blood-alcohol level the machine reaches is .34 percent, which is more than four times the legal limit of .08 percent in Illinois. Beldyga didn't tell students what the rest of the corresponding blood-alcohol levels were as the machine increased, because he didn't want them to get comfortable at any level.

By the time many of the students got out of the machine they had struck police cars, run stop signs and turned the wrong way down one-way streets.

Kristin Meyer, 19, of Lincoln was the first person to attempt the simulator Thursday.

"It was interesting how you could actually feel how much different the car responds and how delayed a lot of (your reactions were)," she said.

Mike Woodrum, 20, of Macomb said he was surprised to see how his driving was impacted.

"You don't see the signs on the sides because you're focused on staying on the road so much," he said.

As students waited their turn at the simulator Thursday, large video screens showed how the other drivers were doing as well as videos of drivers hospitalized after drunken-driving accidents. Another screen showed memorial tributes to those killed by drunken drivers.

Beldyga said the \$2.5 million machine took the Kramer Entertainment Co. five years to research and two years to test before they were ready to travel the country. The program was brought to Monmouth College by the school's wellness office and the Association for Student Activity Programming.

"We're not here to tell you not to drink," Beldyga told many of the students as they exited the simulator. "Just be there for your friends and take the keys."