

Students get hands-on lesson in driving drunk

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Blaine Sheldon and Alex Hoffman said they thought they were getting a chance to play a new video game when they stopped in the atrium of the Rogalski Center at St. Ambrose University on Monday afternoon.

They spotted an arcade-style driver's seat and video monitor, but it wasn't the latest racing game — it was a drunken-driving simulation.

"It looks like a video game, but it shouldn't be represented that way," said Sheldon, a freshman sports management major. "It teaches you how drunk driving is probably that hard in real life."

The Save A Life tour, a drunken-driving prevention program, stopped at St. Ambrose to give students a hands-on lesson about the dangers of drunk driving.

Hoffman experienced what it would be like to drive with a 0.34 blood-alcohol level. The legal limit in Iowa is 0.08.

"It was a lot harder than I expected," said Hoffman, a freshman business major. "You couldn't really see the peripheral vision on the side."

The simulator works by sensing the occupant's weight and calculating their intoxication level after a specific number of drinks.

The steering wheel has a longer delay, as the occupant's level of intoxication increases, to simulate the slower response time a person has after they've been drinking, said Brian Beldyga, manager of the tour.

"It's a full-fledged simulator," he explained. It re-creates "the logistics about how an accident happens."

It's a myth that swerving causes most drunk-driving accidents, Beldyga said. Young people who drink and drive think, "if I don't swerve, I'll be fine."

The reality is that drivers are so focused on not swerving they develop tunnel vision and don't see traffic coming from the left or right, Beldyga said.

He sharply jerked the simulator's wheel to the left and right to let the participants see how many seconds it took for the car to react.

"If you can't do it sober with a coach, how are you going to do it drunk?" he said. "Hopefully today you guys will see a different angle that you haven't seen before," Beldyga told the freshmen as they left the simulator.

Beldyga knows personally how important it is to teach young people about the dangers of drinking and driving. He lost a loved one six years ago to a young drunk driver who had consumed only three beers.

"I'd never thought I'd be doing something like this," he said. But he believes in the program.

"If I get to one of these (students) was it worth our time? Of course it was," he said. "Look at how many people that person could pass on their way home."

Alyssa Boswell, an undeclared freshman, said she wouldn't forget what she learned from the simulation.

"It's scary to think about other people on the road even if they've only had a couple (drinks)," she said. "It's your responsibility, if you see a friend who's been drinking to take their keys."



Larry Fisher/QUAD-CITY TIMES St. Ambrose sophomore Dan Schmidt, 19, tries out a multiscreen drunken-driving simulator, while Brian Beldyga, with the Save a Life Tour, looks on. The simulator was part of the Bee Responsible Alcohol Awareness event at St. Ambrose.