

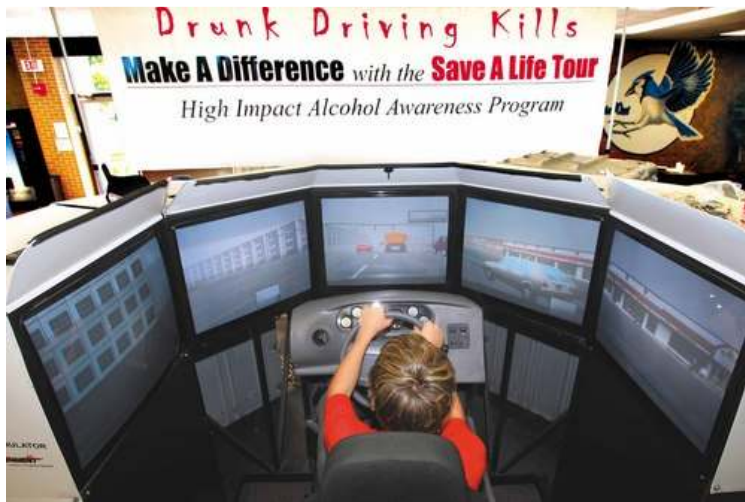
Sitting in simulator could save a life down the road

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WORTHINGTON — These days, students are inundated with information about drugs and alcohol from the time they start school — in some cases as early as kindergarten. There are DARE programs, SADD programs, MADD programs, drug and alcohol awareness programs and lectures about the dangers of drunk driving during driver's education.

On Wednesday, 275 high school students, as well as some college students and a few adults, got the opportunity to drive drunk at Minnesota West Community and Technical College — an eye-opening experience for many of them.

No, they weren't passing out beer in the cafeteria. The students experienced the Save A Life Tour, which includes a drinking and driving simulator.



Fulda High School student Adam Fuchs, 17, takes his turn on the intoxicated driving simulator Wednesday at the Worthington campus of Minnesota West Community and Technical College. (Brian Korthals/Daily Globe)

there are also rearview and side view mirrors.

The driver starts out the three-and-a-half minute simulation “sober,” but the longer they drive, the more “drunk” they become. The reaction time of the machine slows down, which can cause the driver to make wider turns, stop and start with jerks, run red lights and possibly crash into another vehicle or a building.

“This is not Grand Theft Auto,” the students are told before they start. “We want you to drive as you would normally drive.”

But it's not as easy as it may seem.

“You try to drive normal, but you hear the comments behind you, and it gets harder as it goes,” Cross said.

Windom native Cody Hoffman, a first-year law enforcement student at Minnesota West, also found the experience more difficult than he imagined it would be.

“I came in here already knowing that I will never drive while impaired. That is a decision I made long ago,” said Gabby Cross, a senior at Round Lake-Brewster (RL-B) High School. “But this made that idea even stronger.”

Cross was one of many who got “behind the wheel” Wednesday to try the simulator.

The machine has a car seat, a steering wheel, pedals, blinkers and a gear shift. A screen in front shows what a person would see through a windshield. Screens on both sides of the driver simulate side windows, and

“I thought I’d do better than I did,” he admitted. “I ran into a house.”

Hoffman and Cross both said the simulator makes the idea of drinking and driving much more real — and frightening.

“It was a total wake-up call,” Hoffman said. “It gives a real sense of behind the wheel and shows the perfect truth.”

Chris Geysbeek has worked with the Save A Life Tour for more than five years and travels most of the year with the simulator. He speaks with students about driving drunk and tells of his own experience with losing a loved one to a drunk driver.

“This is a lifestyle for us,” he explained. “Everyone that works with the program has been personally affected by drinking and driving.”

Geysbeek said it’s common for students to think they can beat the simulator, only to find it is more difficult than they thought.

“We get a lot of believers when it is over,” he added.

The simulator is brought to high schools and colleges. Geysbeek said the college students are usually more arrogant at first, thinking they know more, have more life experience and can handle the program.

“Some students think it is a video game,” he added. “They drive crazy, run red lights on purpose and don’t take it seriously. When that happens, we just shut it off.”

When a person finishes the simulation, he or she is handed a bracelet to wear that states, “I’ll take the keys.”

“We want them to be there for their friends, take the keys from someone who may try to drive,” Geysbeek explained. “We can’t be blind to it — can’t pretend that high school kids don’t drink. We have to address the problem.”

There’s always the reality that some students still won’t get it. As one teenager struggled to control the car, another laughed while watching his efforts.

“Whatever,” the onlooker said. “That is not what it’s like.”

Minnesota West Program Director Kile Behrends disagreed after trying the simulator herself.

“It feels very real,” she said. “I think the simulator is definitely a real situation and will get kids to realize, ‘It could be you.’”

That’s precisely one of the points the Save A Life Tour is trying to make.

“We encourage them to make the decision. It is as simple as yes or no,” Geysbeek said. “If we can get even one person to not drink and drive, it’s worth it.”

The event was co-sponsored by the Minnesota West Student Senate, the Worthington High School SADD Chapter, the Nobles County Integration Collaborative and Community Education.