

STAC students experience drunken driving without the drinks

By ALICE GOMSTYN - THE JOURNAL NEWS - November 17, 2006

SPARKILL - First Samantha Bohmer ran a red light. Then she swerved into the opposite lane of traffic. Then she skidded into a park.

Felipe Martinez had it even worse: he crashed into a house.

"I decided to turn too late," he said.

Martinez, 18, of the Bronx and Bohmer, 18, of Demarest, N.J., were two of some 100 students at St. Thomas Aquinas College to take part in the Save A Life Tour, an anti-drunken driving program that uses automobile simulators to demonstrate how alcohol consumption can impair driving ability. The program is run by Kramer Entertainment, a company based in Grand Rapids, Mich.



Jason Pantoja, 20, of the Bronx takes his turn in the drunken driving simulator at St. Thomas Aquinas College yesterday in Sparkill. Peter Carr/The Journal News

The company set up two simulators at the college yesterday. One consisted of a single screen, a steering wheel, a brake pedal and a gas pedal. It was there to give students practice using the machines.

The other was more complex: In addition to a steering wheel, pedals and a front screen, it included four side screens, an adjustable seat, an ignition, a turn signal lever, a gear shifter, a parking brake, a speedometer and other devices and knobs standard in a car interior.

The screens displayed a virtual world of roads, street signs, homes, office buildings and moving cars.

"We wanted to make it as realistic as possible," said Chris Geysbeek, of the Save A Life Tour.

There was a catch: The simulator also included built-in delays designed to mimic the delayed response times typically experienced by intoxicated drivers.

Using the machine, most said, was no joy ride.

"Almost everybody crashes," said Charles Pryor, the college's director of student activities and orientation programs. "Those that haven't - I think that's because they stopped and went to class."

This is how it works: Not long after they turn a key in the simulator's ignition, participants find that their "car" takes an unusually long time to respond to a press of the brake or the turn of a steering wheel. The more time they spend behind the wheel, the longer the car takes to respond until finally, drivers find themselves struggling with a full one-second delay.

"It's hard to steer when you need to steer and hard to actually brake when you need to stop," said Evan Foote, 19, of Pearl River.

"It's difficult," Bohmer said. "It impacts your thinking and judgement."

At the end of each simulation, Geysbeek gave participants black wristbands bearing the Save A Life Tour's Web site address. The parting gift did little to ease the anxiety that some participants, like Cynthia Brandel, 18, of the Bronx felt after the simulator experience.

"It makes me nervous," she said. "It's just a game, but things like that happen in real life and you don't get a wristband at the end. You get a coffin instead."