



## Getting a feel for DUI: Thiel students take wheel in simulator

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GREENVILLE— Some Thiel College students this week experienced firsthand the impairing effects of alcohol on their driving ability, thanks to a driving simulator that is part of the “Save A Life” Tour.

“This is not about prohibition,” said Brian Beldyga, senior manager at Kramer Inc., the company that provided the simulator for the national campaign to discourage drunken driving. “This is about being responsible.”

Patrons sit in the car seat behind a realistic console with a Ford logo on the steering wheel and seatbelt. Three video screens display in front and at the sides a virtual suburban or city street. But the controls respond in a sluggish, partly delayed way that is meant to mirror the chemical delay that alcohol creates in the brain, Beldyga said.

As the drivers start the simulator’s purring engine, Beldyga asks them to turn on his MP3 player and to put on some driving music. He is clearly playing the part of a backseat driving friend.

Because the controls respond sluggishly, drivers don’t see an immediate response. Beldyga explained that the human brain likes responses in stressful situations and when drunken drivers — and Wednesday’s simulator drivers — get no reaction from the wheel, they overcorrect.

According to Beldyga, about 15 percent of accidents happen because of swerving from overcorrection. But a whopping 75 percent are because drunken drivers concentrate so hard on driving straight, that they miss something important and cause an accident, Beldyga said.

“There are like 50 things you have to do when you drive, and you cannot do it with a one-track mind,” Beldyga said.

Even after one beer and no buzz, Beldyga said, peripheral vision can shrink about 10 percent.

When drivers made mistakes in the simulator, Beldyga let them know with comments like, “You stopped 40 feet before the sign, but that’s OK. Cops don’t notice that.”

One virtual driver said he didn’t drink and drive. Beldyga said, “You guys want to know a great fact? I’ve never met anyone who drinks and drives who has done this program. What a safe country we live in.”

Simulator driver Nick Farinacci swerved into the side of a house. “Those guys are watching Sponge Bob Square Pants!” Beldyga said. “And you denied them that.”

“I do it for one reason,” Beldyga said later. “If I don’t say it, they don’t know they did something wrong. They have to realize that cops can pull them over for that.”

Farinacci felt the simulator was instructive. “It’s probably harder than the simulation makes it out to be, because there are a lot more effects of alcohol than on your timing,” Farinacci said.

About 150 students tried the simulator on Wednesday. Heather Achenbach, director of student activities, said the event was organized “since it is common knowledge that most college students drink at some point in their career.” Moreover, spring break is coming up, she said.



Brian Beldyga, a senior manager with the entertainment group who provided this simulator, is explaining the mechanical delay between when you turn the wheel and when the “car” reacts. That delay simulates the chemical one in the brain when you drink, he said. About 150 Thiel students tried out the simulator on Wednesday in the Howard Miller Student Center.