

Saving lives:

Tour shows DHS students dangers of drinking, driving

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Photo: Save a Life Tour Founder Brian Beldyga, left, instructs Thomas Starr on how to use the drunk driving simulator Monday during an assembly.

Swerving off the pavement, missing red lights and fender benders troubled the students at Daleville High School Monday morning as they drove a multi-million dollar simulator that demonstrated the effects of drunk driving.

"I didn't feel anything different at first. I was just trying to make sure I was doing everything right," senior Thomas Starr said. "Then a car turned in front of me and I slammed on the brakes but I ran right into him."

Starr was one of hundreds of Daleville students to take a test drive on the state-of-the-art simulator as part of the Save a Life Tour. DHS's Students Against Destructive Decisions sponsored the "Save a Life" tour, which made its first appearance in the Wiregrass. It is a national tour made up of a 45-minute assembly about the dangers of drinking and driving and a static media display.

During Starr's drive, he noticed delayed reaction time and lack of control of the vehicle.

"I had never felt that before," he said. Other students were surprised by the same poor driving behaviors that occurred to them while in the simulator.

"It was really hard," said senior Keely Reeves. "I would press the brakes and it wouldn't stop immediately; I'd turn the wheel but it would move slower."

Reeves said she noticed that her reaction time was a lot different as a result of the simulated drunk driving.

"It taught me if you're drunk, you won't have control of your car," she said.

The simulator is located at the center of the static display. With a 180-degree view on three liquid crystal displays, the simulator is widely considered the most realistic drunk-driving simulator.

It takes participants on an 87-mile drive, during which 20 different levels of preprogrammed drinking and driving effects are simulated, representing consumption of anywhere between one and 30 beers.

Founder Brian Beldyga presented the "edu-tainment" assembly sponsored by Kramer Entertainment Inc., and FAAC Inc., spoke to all the high school students prior to the simulator exercise.

"This is America's most violently committed crime," Beldyga said of drunk driving, which killed nearly 37,000 people last year. "You guys do have something to worry about."

Beldyga, originally of Michigan, tours all over the United States in hopes of discouraging teens to drink and drive and showing them the effects of alcohol.

"If you can't do it sober and with my help, how is someone supposed to drive while drinking," Beldyga asked students. Beldyga confessed to have driven drunk, but he said, he learned his lesson the hard way.

"I was the guy out there putting you guys in danger," he said. I've come here today to give you the confidence to not drink and drive, to step in and take the keys from your friends."

Beldyga lost his best friends in high school to an accident on prom night, but he didn't learn his lesson then.

It wasn't until college, when he lost a very close loved one that he began to change his ways. "I learned something that day because it officially affected me," Beldyga said.

Beldyga is now committed to spreading his story and message in order to prevent others from facing the horrors of drunk driving.

"If you don't learn the lesson today, you'll learn it like I did," he said.

Emergency room footage from drinking related accidents, a coffin, and a Home Box Office production movie "Smashed" completed the impacting program.

SADD sponsor Chris Payne explained that SADD originally began to combat drunk driving and had since expanded its horizons. In honor of SADD's national 25th anniversary, the DHS chapter wanted to plan a program to celebrate SADD's beginnings and educate students.

"This is our 25th anniversary celebration. I can't think of a better way to get the year started," he said.

SADD club members worked for more than a year to bring the tour to Daleville.

Payne thanked Walmart of Enterprise and Ozark, Lowe's, CB&T Bank, Army Aviation Federal Credit Union, and the Econo Lodge for their support.

The DHS chapter of SADD is one of 200 in Alabama. State Director John Perkins was present for the assembly and recognized the chapter as "one of the top in the state" with which he was "very impressed.