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Simulation lets sailors experience the effects of drinking and driving before getting on the streets

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PASCAGOULA -- Local sailors experienced the dangers of drunk driving Monday without driving an inch on the road.

The five computer screens and simulated dashboard set up at the Lakeside Naval Support Facility looked like a high-tech computer game. The national Save A Life Tour, a production of Kramer International Inc., made a stop in Pascagoula to show sailors from the USS Makin Island and the USS Mesa Verde what it's like to drive while under the influence of alcohol.

The simulator looks like a video game, with computer screens surrounding the participant, a dashboard and side mirrors.

It feels like a sober driving experience when it first starts, but, in less than four minutes, the driver goes from completely sober to near the state of alcohol poisoning, said manager Chris Geysbeck.

The system simulates the motor skill delays associated with drunkenness by making it more difficult for the driver to steer the car straight, Geysbeck said. The side screens fade over the course of the game to simulate tunnel vision.

"Basically, we put those delays in the gas and brakes," Geysbeck said.

The game ends when it reaches a certain level of intoxication, or when the driver crashes before the time limit, which often happens, Geysbeck said.

It was explained to the drivers that, as they became more intoxicated, they had to use all their concentration on keeping the steering wheel straight, which caused them to miss seeing other vehicles on the road.

Drug and alcohol awareness officer Valentine Espinoza said the simulator can be effective when people ignore the verbal warnings about drinking and driving. Espinoza said the sailors reacted with surprise that it was so difficult to maneuver a car while under the influence of alcohol.

"You can only tell someone so many times, Don't drink and drive," Espinoza said.

One of those sailors, Jevaras Barber, said he has not drank alcohol for seven years, since he was cited for DUI, but he did not expect the simulation to imitate his real-life experience.

"I can remember what it was like drinking and driving," Barber said. "It (simulation) was, for me, close to the real thing."

People should remember that driving under the influence is not safe, no matter how careful the driver is, Barber said.

"It's not easy, and it's not something people should take for granted," Barber said.

Geysbeck estimated that the tour's two systems visit 400 to 600 high schools, colleges and corporations each year.