



State Trooper shows film during school's Red Ribbon Week events

By Jan Schultz
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If the quiet room afterwards was an indication, a "real time" look at the death of two teenagers in a 2005 accident that involved drinking and driving seemed to make an impression on grade 7-12 students at CCS last week.

Much of the film, "Graduation Day," featured "real time" video including the accident from inside the car, taken by one of the surviving teens. Two of the four teens in the vehicle died.

State Patrol Trooper Jeffery Van Stelton, who is assigned to Troop-D in North Platte and serves the Chase County area, was at Chase County Schools last Friday.

His "Don't Drink and Drive" message came during Red Ribbon Week activities sponsored by the school's FCCLA chapter.

In the film, one of the teens starts filming his high school's graduation events early in the day. That night, the teens attended a party and all four in the vehicle had been drinking.

With videotape rolling, the teens left the party, all visibly intoxicated. A few blocks away, the driver ran a red light, their vehicle was hit and two died.

One of the crash survivors interviewed in the film said, "I never thought it would happen to us."

Prior to the film, Trooper Van Stelton reviewed the laws, penalties and some of the misconceptions youths may have about Driving Under the Influence (DUI) arrests.

"Most teens are not informed on DUI laws," he said.

"And, if you are drinking, teens are more likely to get pulled over," he added.

Even though teens represent just eight percent of the licensed drivers in Nebraska, the trooper said they account for 26 percent of all crashes and 15 percent of the fatal ones.

Drinking alcohol affects several parts of the body, including slowing response time and affecting balance and coordination.

"Your judgment and decision-making are seriously affected," he said.

To give the students an idea of what that means, the trooper said normal response time to a stimulus is about 1.6 seconds. Traveling at 55 mph, it would take 80 feet to stop.

In contrast, a driver with alcohol in his/her system will have a slower response time to stimulus of three to four seconds. Then, it will take about 320 feet to stop, longer than a football field.

It is illegal for minors (under the age of 21) to drive with an alcohol level of .02 or higher in their system. For adults, a person can be cited if at or above the .08 level.

He said it may be a misconception to some that only the teenage driver suspected of drinking can be breath-tested for alcohol. However, all passengers in the vehicle can be, he said.

Juveniles can be taken into custody for DUI, can be handcuffed and searched, he said.

Being arrested and found guilty of DUI can get quite expensive, too, the trooper said.

Adding in towing of the vehicle, bail, attorney fees, court costs, fines, license reinstatement and rise in insurance rates, it could total over \$5,000.

Even with that, it was noted the U.S. is quite lenient on its drunk driving penalties. He listed several other countries, most of which have much tougher laws.

One that brought laughs was Australia. When a person there is found guilty of DUI, their name and photo are sent to the local newspaper, which publishes them with "Drunk Driver in Jail" as a headline.

Other countries impose hard labor and much longer jail time than the U.S.

At the start of the grade 7-12 program, the six-year trooper noted he wasn't wearing his uniform that day because he is recovering from an accident in April.

Traveling west on Highway 34 near Stratton, responding to a reported burglary, he suffered a head-on collision with an unlicensed 17-year-old driver. In the fiery crash, he sustained severe injuries to his pelvis, legs and arms.

His continuing recovery gives him time to present programs like last week's at CCS.

Later Friday afternoon, CCS students in grades K-6 also attended a program given by the trooper.