



The Post-Standard

Real messages in mock DWI scene

Friday, May 18, 2007

By Kathy Coffta Sims
Staff writer

About 300 students at Cazenovia High School watched in disbelief Thursday morning as their classmates were pulled from the wreckage of a mangled car on the front lawn of the school.

One, Richard Budnar, 18 and the student council president, was taken out of the car and put in a body bag as three of the car's passengers stood by, crying.

The adults standing on the school lawn watched carefully, hoping the teens were getting the message they wanted the drama to send: Drinking and driving don't mix.

"This was supposed to be a shock to them," said Britt Zumpano, a counselor at the school. "Most of the students and teachers didn't know what was going on when they were called out of class."

The mock driving while intoxicated crash, and the program that followed, left some students reeling emotionally, while others wondered if their classmates would get the message.

"Junior prom is this weekend,

so we purposely did this now. The ball is June 1 for seniors," said senior Jennifer Riebe, 18, the president of Students Against Destructive Decisions, the group that organized the event. "We've been working on this since January," Riebe said.

"We were trying to get more personal. One out of three people have an alcohol-related accident. For them, to see something like this, it might have a bigger impact," she said.

Riebe said she knows her classmates drink and drive.

"A lot. There's not a lot to do out here. Kids are going to drink," she said. "The cops do a good job, but still"

David Amico, the police chief in the village of Cazenovia, was pleased that the students had decided to put on the program.

"I think this is a real great idea. I'm hoping this gives the kids a wake-up call. I hope they have a safe prom with no drinking and driving," Amico said.

Funeral director Brian Tait talked to the juniors and seniors about how tough it is for him to be called to the scene of a DWI crash that involves teens.

"This isn't funny. This happens. I've had to do this too many times, and I don't want to do it

anymore," Tait said. "Each and every one of you has the opportunity to stop this from happening. When that black bag is zipped, there is no second chance. I hate having to bury a young person."

Tait talked about the anguish he and Amico endure when they have to inform parents, telling the students they can't imagine the horror and the tears.

"This is something you never want to do. If we can stop it in any way, we should," Tait said.

After Tait spoke, students were ushered into the auditorium to hear Marianne Angelillo speak.

They passed a table filled with mementos and pictures of Angelillo's son, Matt, who was killed in a DWI crash in June 2004. The Skaneateles mother has been speaking out against drinking and driving ever since.

She told the packed auditorium that she was at the school to share her pain, "in the hopes that it will save a life."

"I believe in the power of learning through others' stories," she said. "This is a story about risk-taking and poor choices."

Angelillo went on to tell the students about her son, who was a star athlete and an honor student who had been accepted to the Air Force Academy.

"He was at the pinnacle of his life," she said.

"I try not to ever think about that night," she said. "I can never get away from the pain it caused. It causes nightmares and anxiety attacks for me and my family."

Angelillo stressed that what happened to her son was not an accident but was caused by poor choices that were made while teens were under the influence of alcohol.

"This was a reckless act," she said. "Matt never had a chance in this car."

After she finished speaking, she showed the students a video that featured clips of Matt Angelillo from his childhood until shortly before he died.

Several students sobbed quietly as music played and Matt Angelillo could be heard laughing and joking with his friends and family.

"My intent is not to change the world," Marianne Angelillo said at the video's conclusion. "If I can just reach one of you today, my mission is accomplished."

The students then filed out of the auditorium and headed to St. James Catholic Church, across the street from the school, for a mock wake.

Once there, they were asked to reflect on what they had seen and to fill out a questionnaire, designed to make them think about what the world would be like if they were suddenly no longer here.

Zumpano hopes to use some of the students' reflections on posters that will be put up around the school.

Senior Karlie Joseph, 18, remains concerned about whether the message really got through to

her classmates.

"People don't always make the best decisions," Joseph said before filling out her sheet. "I don't think stuff like this changes people. I think for people to really respond, it has to be someone they know."

Kathy Coffta Sims can be reached at kcoffta@syracuse.com or 470-3253.

© 2007 The Post-Standard. Used with permission.

Copyright 2007 syracuse.com. All Rights Reserved.