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'Your Life, Your Choice' offers sober warning to high school seniors

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Apr 27, 2023



Kenston High School senior Jack Novak dons impairment goggles and walks a straight line to simulate intoxication during a field sobriety test as Geauga County Sheriff's deputies look on.

Seniors of local high schools, including Kenston, Chardon and Gilmour Academy, recently attended an assembly that served as a warning of the dangers of intoxicated or distracted driving.

The annual program was started in 2006 by Chagrin Falls Police Officer Dick Goldsmith, whose daughter, before her graduation from Kenston High School, was killed by a man who had multiple prior convictions for drunk driving.

Geauga County Sheriff's Office has since taken over the program.

The Geauga County Sheriff Scott Hildenbrand opened the "Your Life, Your Choice" program by telling students that they would be hearing from speakers who made a wrong choice – which they more than likely realized at the time.

"If you have to stop and say, 'Should I do this or should I not?' you probably should not," he said.

When the program was started many years ago, texting while driving was not discussed because it was not prevalent.

But it is now.

"(It has) become so distracting and caused so many accidents that the State of Ohio has now passed a law that you cannot have any handheld device in your hand while you are driving a car," Sheriff Hildenbrand said.

He explained that the law is not limited to texting, but applies to changing music on a phone or touching any device at all. A police officer may now initiate a traffic stop and give a ticket if he sees a driver using a device.

He explained that penalties increase with each violation.

"This is very serious, and we do this because we care," he said. "The other thing that we talk about is drinking and driving. There are many options now to get home safely without driving: You have Uber, Lyft, your parents. I don't know any of your parents, but I can guarantee you that if you call them because you made a bad choice, they will come get you."

Students participated in activities such as walking while wearing impairment goggles, and then heard from impactful speakers, including Greg Potts, a probation officer with the Geauga County Court of Common Pleas, and Brian Rosenberg, who in 2014 took another motorist's life and almost lost his own while driving intoxicated.

Mr. Rosenberg said that, 13 years ago, he, too, attended a program like “Your Life, Your Choice” – and he wishes he would have listened.

“After they unrestrained me, took the breathing machine out, took the catheter out, I realized I was all right,” Mr. Rosenberg recalled. “In a weird twist of fate, usually the drunk person in an accident doesn’t suffer many injuries because they don’t tense up because their motor skills are decreased.”

Mr. Rosenberg was indicted, went to rehab, and wore a court-ordered ankle monitor. His parents showed up at his bond hearing with the title to their house, ready to offer their house as collateral for Mr. Rosenberg’s freedom.

Mr. Rosenberg lost his license, his job – the only job he has ever lost – and was kicked off campus.

When he went to prison, another prisoner kicked him in the head in a squabble in the line for the phone, which caused a concussion. He talked to his dying grandmother for the last time on a prison phone. The worst of all was the “psychological stress of, day in and day out, dealing with the worst convicted felons” in Ohio.

Before the incident, he never thought it could happen to him or anyone like him.

On a daily basis, in supervising drug court, Mr. Potts works with individuals who made a wrong choice. He asked the student audience about their hobbies, and their future plans. They yelled responses such as Miami University, University of Mississippi, cosmetology, dentist school, neuroscience.

“I don’t want you to just make decisions because you’re worried about all the negative consequences,” Mr. Potts said. Instead, he encouraged them to consider their goals and passions before making a choice that could affect them forever.

Mr. Potts said that, in the event his own children drank, he would be ecstatic if they made the next right decision by calling him to find a safe way home that would not hurt them or anyone else.

He also emphasized the importance of being a good friend, which includes being respectful in the car with friends, supporting them in making safe choices and not distracting a driver.

If “you say you’re not driving, don’t get in a car with somebody else that’s drinking and driving,” he said. “That’s also not being supportive of that friend.”

Sheriff Hildenbrand thanked students for their attention, as well as school administrators and others who helped make this year’s program possible. He knows of its impact on the audience.

“It’s just amazing,” he said. “There will be 1,500 kids in here. They will all be quiet. They won’t be playing on their cell phones – they’ll be paying attention to the message. If we can reach however many, this is all worth it.”