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Save A Life Tour Road Manager Cody Beerthuis, right, watches as a Seward County Community College student takes a turn on the driving simulator Wednesday afternoon. The student steers the car with his left hand, while texting with his right hand, demonstrating the dangers of texting and driving. He invariably crashed. L&T photo/Robert Pierce

By ROBERT PIERCE • Leader & Times Countless cases of people being killed in an accident involving a distracted driver have taken place in the history of automobiles.

With advances in technology, particularly in the area of communications, the number of cases continues to mount up, and officials from a national group were at Seward County Community College Wednesday to show young people some of the dangers of distracted driving.

Cody Beerthuis, road manager for the Save A Life Tour, said his group travels across the U.S. to schools, colleges, car shows and military bases to show the dangers. He said although there are many forms of distracted driving, Save A Life's primary focus is cell phones.

"We try to open people's eyes and give them a little perspective of what they're doing while they're driving distracted like other things that are going on, how many people are being killed every year," he said.

Beerthuis said statistics indicate more than 6,000 deaths and 250,000 injuries happen every year because of distracted driving. The deaths, though, include people playing with devices such as iPods or changing the radio station, but Beerthuis said cell phones are, by far, the biggest distraction.

“It’s not only taking your eyes off the road, but your brain’s not focusing,” he said. “You’re wrapped up in conversations or reading messages.”

Beerthuis said while other problems such as drunk driving are huge issues, Save A Life focuses on texting and driving due to numbers.

“Not everyone drinks,” he said. “There’s a lot of minors that don’t drink and some of the minors that do drink, but not everyone does go out and drink and drive. Everyone has a cell phone these days, and everyone is so dependant on their phone. They’re so used to checking their messages, their e-mail or whatever else they may do, social networking. When it goes off while they’re driving, they’re so comfortable driving after all these years of driving that they think they can do both things at the same time.” Beerthuis said Save A Life does not just center its research on youth. “We’re focusing on everybody,” he said. “There was actually a study done very recently saying that adults are more likely to text and drive than teenagers.” Beerthuis is became involved with Save A Life because of a personal experience.

“I was actually involved in a wreck my junior year of high school,” he said. “My buddy was scrolling through his contacts trying to call someone. It was me, him and his girlfriend heading up north from Michigan. He looked down too long, and we ended up hitting a tree.”

Beerthuis said the car he and his friends were in flipped four times, and because of the accident, he watched his friend’s girlfriend bleed to death.

“We were in the car for about an hour and half,” he said. “I couldn’t find the phone afterwards. It ended up flying out of the car, and we ended up laying there for about an hour and a half before anyone drove by to call for help. I ended up watching her bleed to death, and my buddy was in a coma for about six months. It affected me personally.”

Beerthuis said Save A Life has crews which do about four shows a week between September and May across America. The road manager himself has been to more than 40 states.

Beerthuis said he was unsure if the number of accidents involving texting and driving are declining, but through social networking, he has discovered that the presentations are making a difference.

“I have my Facebook page, and I’ve had students message me privately after shows saying they’re not going to text and drive again,” he said. “A lot of students at the school told us they didn’t realize how dangerous it really is. We have opened a lot of eyes.”

Beerthuis, though, said there are still others who are not getting the message.

“In my presentation at the high schools, I say, ‘The sad truth is no matter what I say or do,

they're still going to do what they're going to do," he said.

Beerthuis did say, however, he does give a new perspective on how dangerous distracted driving is.

"When it comes down to it, it's going to take something for them to go through for them to change their lifestyle," he said. "Some of them might listen to me and take it to heart. Some of them might quit texting and driving, but a vast majority of them won't."

Beerthuis said the presentation does start students thinking about changing the habit of texting and driving, though.

"I like to keep their attention so that maybe one day when they may have a close call or have someone that might go through an accident, they'll think back to what we're teaching them today and actually stop for a little bit rather than keep going," he said.

The presentation itself starts with a 20-minute video, which Beerthuis described as "very, very graphic."

"It has lots of clips of car accidents, and it has personal stories of people who actually lost family, their siblings or their daughters because of texting and driving," he said.

Participants are then shown a commercial clip from the United Kingdom of a person who killed two friends in a car accident due to playing on a phone while driving.

Beerthuis then brings out statistics such as the 6,000 deaths caused by distracted driving, comparing that to deaths caused by plane crashes. He said the latter numbers are lower than the former, but more is being done about flying than distracted driving.

"I talk about how the average text message takes five seconds to send or receive, which is the same thing as driving the length of a football field at 55 miles per hour blindfolded with traffic," he said.

Beerthuis then shares his personal story before explaining a simulator that replicates texting and driving. The remainder of the day is spent on the simulators letting the students experience how dangerous distracted driving is.

Beerthuis said so far, 39 states have made it illegal to text and drive.

"Some states, it's just for novice drivers," he said. "Some states, it's for everybody."

Beerthuis said 20 states have also enacted laws making it illegal to talk on the phone while driving without the aid of a Bluetooth device, while still others want to make it illegal to talk on a phone while driving with or without the device.

Beerthuis said the message he wants to get across is simple – driving is a responsibility.

“It’s not just you going somewhere,” he said. “There’s so many other things going on. You’re not the only person on the road. There’s other deer and animals that jump out. You need to be focused on driving. People have taken that for granted because they do it so often that they just think it’s a normal everyday function.”

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