

School riveted by drunken driving speech

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With the whole school watching, Rich St. Cyr kept his composure.

But not many others did in Wednesday's assembly at Troy Athens High School.

Boys in ball caps and girls in tank tops froze to their seats, riveted by St. Cyr's reminiscences of his son Jeremy, and by a slide show showing the handsome, smiling boy who walked the halls with the students less than a year ago -- before a drunken driver took his life.

"I saw guys crying in there, people you wouldn't expect to react," said senior Amber Hickey, 17, after watching the program aimed at keeping her and other students safe from the tragedy that befell Jeremy.

"Thank you for writing more than 250 letters to the judge," St. Cyr told them. "And I can tell you, it did make a difference. The man who killed Jeremy is now serving nine years in a penitentiary," he said. The crowd erupted in applause.

As high schools nationwide mount their annual spring programs to fight drunken driving -- April is Alcohol Awareness Month -- students at Troy Athens are getting a triple whammy.

On Tuesday, a confidential questionnaire pried at their deepest secrets about drugs and booze. On Wednesday, St. Cyr's talk brought slouching dudes to tears. Today more than 200 will drive or ride in a rigged Chrysler Neon, whose turning and braking are computer-controlled to mimic the moves of a drunken driver.

"We always have a lot of programs around spring break and prom time and graduation time, just to remind kids that if they celebrate, they should celebrate sober," said Michele Compton, chapter administrator for Oakland County MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving).

Requests are pouring into her office, requesting support for alcohol-free parties.

At Troy Athens, drunken driving prevention has become a virtual crusade, with students still reeling from losing three classmates last spring.

Jeremy St. Cyr died instantly May 24 after the car he was riding in with five Athens classmates was rear-ended at a suburban Chicago freeway tollbooth, struck by a vehicle driven by a 40-year-old Illinois man.

Ten days later, Athens graduates Mike Jamieson and Andy Stindt and Troy High senior Ashley Easterbrook died when their car was broadsided by a drunken driver in Troy.

This week's alcohol-awareness blitz at Athens was organized by volunteers who give free rides -- no questions asked -- to any student who needs one on Friday and Saturday nights throughout the school year.

Their group, called Athens Safe Rides, operates from donated space in a real estate office, said JoAnn Preston, a parent who has run the program for eight years, continuing after her last daughter graduated several years ago.

"We take the phone call at our base, from anywhere in Troy, we get the address, and we dispatch a car with a coed team to pick them up. They pick up only one student at a time," Preston said.

The rider's ID is kept confidential, she said. About a dozen parents alternate giving their time on Friday and Saturday nights, Preston said. A similar program operates at Grosse Pointe South High School, she said.

Safe Rides was originated by the Boy Scouts of America, and any high school can set one up -- if it can find enough parents to volunteer, said Pamela Voss-Page, who oversees a nonprofit group that directs Michigan's 590 chapters of SADD (Students Against Driving Drunk).

For more information on the Safe Rides program, call JoAnn Preston at 1-248-528-2647 anytime.

Schools interested in the Chrysler Neon Drunk Driving Simulator Program can call 1-800-443-4288 anytime; ask for Neon Simulator.

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