

Ad recalls Troy teen

1997 victim of drunken driving featured in campaign

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Starting this fall, a nationwide TV audience will see a Troy family's teenage daughter cavort with a girlfriend.

On hundreds of stations, including Detroit-area channels, viewers will see her laugh, sing and hug her friend on a home video.

Then they'll read sobering words: "Ashley Easterbrook, treasured friend, killed by a drunk driver four days before graduation. Friends don't let friends drive drunk."

Easterbrook died in 1997 in a crash that also killed two of her friends and the 31-year-old motorist who hit their car in Troy.

She joins a series of young subjects memorialized in public-service campaigns to prevent drunken driving. For a radio version, Easterbrook's 19-year-old brother, Adam Easterbrook, will read excerpts from her diary that express his sister's deep fear of drunken drivers and premonition of death.

The ads, part of a 16-year-old sober-driving campaign called Innocent Victims, could help fill a need University of Michigan researchers spotted recently.

The researchers say public awareness campaigns waned during the 1990s, and that led to increases in drunken driving, illicit drug use and other social problems. A major reason was increased competition in the TV industry, in part due to the advent of cable television.

"So less and less free air time was available" for public-service advertising, said Dr. Lloyd Johnston, principal investigator of the U-M Monitoring the Future study, now in its 26th year of surveying high school graduates about things such as marijuana use and career goals.

"Certainly, the evidence shows some of these campaigns really made a difference" in changing social behavior, Johnston said Tuesday.

The ads featuring Ashley Easterbrook will be distributed by the Ad Council, a coalition of agencies that virtually pioneered public-service advertising, beginning with ads to sell war bonds during World War II. The Ad Council was created by advertising executives who hoped to persuade Americans to buy bonds, conserve fuel and otherwise help the war effort.

An Ad Council spokeswoman in Washington, D.C., said deregulation in the communications industry in the 1980s resulted in the government dropping the requirement that stations run public-service advertisements.

"The support we receive across all media -- television, radio, print and outdoor -- is not as great as we used to receive," she said. She said figures were not available to specify the extent of the decline.

To return more ads to airwaves, magazine pages and billboards, Congress allocated funds for a five-year series of antidrug advertisements that began last year. The funding allowed some ads to appear in prime-time television periods, U-M's Johnston said.

Most stations continue to run some public-service announcements. Tonight, from 8 to 9 p.m. in Michigan, more than two dozen national broadcast and cable networks will premiere a new campaign of public-service messages to prevent youth violence in schools.

President Bill Clinton presented the ads Tuesday at the White House. They're an outgrowth of a White House meeting about youth violence that followed the April shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo.

Easterbrook's parents said they were surprised months ago when a Michigan State Police highway safety analyst called and asked if they would lend their daughter's name to the ads.

David and Gail Easterbrook said they didn't hesitate. They offered family photos, video film and their daughter's diary excerpts to Bozell Worldwide, the advertising agency that created the spots.

David Easterbrook is a Kmart executive who became an activist against drunken driving after his daughter's death. She would have approved of the ads, he said.

"She wouldn't want people to forget."

Gail Easterbrook agreed. Watching the ad at their home last week, she said, "She's doing a lot to spread her thoughtfulness and caring, even in death."

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