

Billboard campaign will remind drivers not to get behind the wheel after drinking

By: Stephen Frye, News Reporter
December 18, 2000

Billboards will show picture of Ashley Easterbrook who was killed by a drunken driver

While on the roads next week, expect to see messages about the dangers of drunk driving as the first of three extensive billboard campaigns begins Monday in the metro area.

More than 100 billboards will display a stark reminder of the potentially fatal results of drinking and driving - a picture of Ashley Marie Easterbrook of Troy, a 1997 victim of a drunken driving accident, along with a simple message, "A drunk driver took Ashley's life. We keep her dreams alive."

The black-and-white billboards are commissioned by the Foundation for Ashley's Dream, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the fight against drunken driving, and Infinity Outdoor, a national advertising firm.

David Easterbrook, president of the foundation and Ashley's father, wants people to connect the message with a face. On June 3, 1997, Ashley and two of her friends died when their car was struck by a drunk driver who ran a red light in Troy.

"You've got to let people know it happens to real people," Easterbrook said. "It can happen to anybody. We don't like to see that. By putting that picture up there, it puts a face to it."

The 105 billboards will be up for 30 days, and they will return for two more 30-day periods later next year - in May before the start of the summer holidays and in September as school starts.

One 30-day period typically would cost about \$80,000, but with the help of Infinity Outdoor, the foundation paid only \$25,000 for the entire project.

With the onset of the Christmas and New Year's holidays, organizers want drivers to think of the consequences before they take the wheel after drinking. The first billboard is already up on South Road near Woodward Avenue.

"Billboards are an awesome way to communicate," Easterbrook said. "They are short and sweet and drive the point home."

The foundation's website address, www.ashleysdream.org, is also on the billboard, an added bonus for Easterbrook.

Easterbrook stressed that the scale of the current project could not be done without the help of Thomas Carroll, vice president of the central region for Infinity Outdoor.

Last year, the foundation conducted a similar but much smaller campaign; afterwards, Carroll told Easterbrook he would help out with any future efforts because of the cause.

The campaign, in its initial scaled-down form, was to be a kickoff for 2001 marketing of the anti-drunk driving message; however, with the help of Carroll, the magnitude of the project expanded greatly in just the past week.

"This is one of the largest public service campaigns in recent memory, something as big as a major commercial consumer outfit might do." Carroll said. "There's no doubt it will make people stop and think over the next few weeks and certainly save some lives."

The foundation has five main goals: promote concern of the problem, provide resources to fight it, prevent drunks from driving, purge drunken drivers from the roads and punish the ones apprehended.

Easterbrook said he is encouraged by programs allowing bar patrons access to a breath test before they drive, but his main complaint is the prevalence of offenders who plead down their first offense.

While Easterbrook knows his battle is tough, he is confident that progress is being made in making the roadways safer. Though drunk driving deaths in Oakland County increased by about 50 percent to 35 in 1999, such deaths decreased statewide last year.

Plus, he said he is confident the state will follow federal guidelines and lower the legal limit for blood alcohol content from .10 to .08.

"Do I think it's getting better? Yes," the 48-year-old Easterbrook said. "I think people are getting a lot smarter about it. I think our young kids get it better than my generation."

At same time, though, Easterbrook points out that his daughter was "murdered" by the 33-year-old female driver, who also died. Ashley's death came just four days before the 18-year-old was to graduate from high school.

"People don't get it," he said. "You get so ticked, you've got to do something about it."

And Easterbrook has done something, starting the foundation after his daughter's death. The foundation raises and distributes money both for scholarships and for combating drunken driving.

Private donations and an annual golf outing make up the budget. So far, nearly \$100,000 has been given in scholarships to high school students and to students at the University of Michigan School of Nursing, where Ashley intended to go.

Funds are also given to chapters of Students Against Drunk Driving. The next golf outing is Aug. 13 at Indian Woods Country Club.

And law enforcement receives money from the foundation for such projects as Operation Night Out, a special patrol looking exclusively for drunken drivers which nabbed 12 offenders on Dec. 13.