

Shattered dreams program impacts students, participants

by Fiona Cohen
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Leaning backward into the fabric of the driver's seat, senior Ray Matthews lies still, eyes shut, feigning momentary unconsciousness. An officer taps the window of the vehicle, questioning passengers. He circles the battered car, assessing the damage done to Matthews's automobile and another crumpled vehicle resting a few yards away. Minutes later Matthews emerges from his car under the gaze of the entire student body. He walks a wobbly line, hears the click of handcuffs on his wrists and fulfills his role as a part of Shattered Dreams.

"I was very open to [playing the drunk driver]," Matthews said, "I was actually very glad. That gives me a chance to take the burden on my shoulders. I'm seen as the bad guy. I was actually glad that I was the one chosen because I knew I could handle it."

The crash scene staged on the morning of April 9 was at first to some merely an excuse to leave class. Laughter bounced between students approaching the scene. But as the dispatch call played out to the assembled students and incoming sirens began to echo down Victoria Ave., a crowd of silent high schoolers revealed all too quickly the gravity of the situation.

"I actually prayed the rosary while I was sitting there, just offering that up to people who do go through this," senior Madison Cashion said. "My back pain was nothing compared to what people actually go through. Even when kids were walking out, I was still praying."

Cashion played the driver of the victim vehicle and was lifelighted from the scene via helicopter. As cameras rolled, Cashion and several other students made their way to various hospitals to receive medical treatment that victims of a similar crash might undergo.

"I feel like a lot of times we're told by motivational speakers or media 'don't drink and drive,'" junior Grace Donovan said. "They can say it all they want, but a lot of the time it's just a series of words strung together that don't give a lot of meaning to a lot of people. The crash scene gave a visual reality to the student body."

Donovan was a member of the so-called "living dead." Every fifteen minutes on April 9, one of these students was pulled from his or her classroom by a police officer and an actor dressed as the grim reaper. Silence fell upon 19 classrooms as the students' obituaries were read aloud to their peers. They returned to class in full makeup, dressed in black and entirely unresponsive.

"I was in my conclusion, in the middle of a sentence and all of a sudden the cop walks in and says 'Grace Donovan, stand up,'" Donovan said. "I was so caught off guard that I slammed the pen down and it went flying across the desk...I remember I was just shaking."

By the end of the day, all six crash scene participants and all 19 of the living dead were haunting both hallways and classrooms, their presence a stark reminder of the unpleasant reality for which Shattered Dreams is named. They attended class silently, both present and absent.

"As soon as I saw all 25 of them together, I thought 'my gosh, that's an entire class,' assistant principal Julia Mishler said, "an entire class of kids affected by alcohol and taking that behind the wheel. It was intended to be a visual for how many people are affected by drunk driving crashes."

For student participants, Shattered Dreams proved to be a rollercoaster of emotions. At a school-wide assembly, audio video production premiered the film they had created in a day, portraying a personal glimpse into the tragic reactions of parents to their hospitalized children.

"I knew immediately that my mom was in the [hospital] room because I could hear her sobbing," Cashion said. "My mom was holding my hand and talking to me and telling me that she loved me. Not being able to sit up and say 'mom, I'm fine, nothing's wrong with me...' that was hard."

But the trauma of the first day proved valuable in conveying a powerful message on Friday, April 10. A presentation from wheelchair-bound Sean Carter, whose brain damage from an alcohol-related crash had left him without the ability to speak, and his mother, Jenny Carter, evoked both laughter and tears from students and teachers alike.

"We knew we wanted Sean when we were talking to his mother on the phone and he responded back with a joke," Mishler said.

Sean Carter's story was one that helped students to understand the risk of drinking and driving. His words were intended to bring about change in the minds of students listening. Through harsh realities and occasional humor, he achieved just that.

"It boils down to a choice," Cashion said. "It's up to you to make the right choice. Is it really worth that one drink?" •

