

The Times-Picayune

Improve driver's training classes

Monday, August 30, 2004

Re: "Unsafe passage," Living, Aug. 23. **ACTUAL ARTICLE BELOW**

I appreciate The Times-Picayune's calling attention to the local and national epidemic of teen crashes and fatalities.

I am past president of the Driving School Association of Louisiana. We are addressing many of the very things you bring up in your article.

There may be another angle to this story: What is being done on the education side to prevent these tragedies?

The Driving School Association of Louisiana has been fighting for higher standards and better regulation of public and private driving programs in Louisiana. If you look at what is being taught in most driver's ed classes, you may get a better understanding of why many of these teens make the wrong decisions. They were never taught about the risk; they do what feels right or whatever will impress their friends.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco is putting an emphasis on education. We agree, and hopefully we can get the support and publicity that this all-important subject needs.

We as a society need to get together and say that the high rate of teen crashes is no longer something we are willing to accept. In almost every case, these are predictable and preventable crashes.

Bud Chauncy

First Class Driving School/ Driving School Association of Louisiana

Bossier City

The Times-Picayune

Unsafe passage

As north shore residents know only too well, adolescence and driving are a potentially fatal combination. Parents can't prevent accidents. But they can help to minimize the risks.

Monday, August 23, 2004

By Barri Bronston

Staff writer

Dominican High School junior Rebecca Gonzales finished her driver's education class, but has failed the state's written driving test two times in a row.

Her mother couldn't be happier.

The longer it takes her to pass the test, the longer Rebecca -- an "A" student at Dominican -- will have to wait to get her driving learner's permit. And the longer she must wait, the less her mother, Lisa Morrow, will have to fear for her daughter's safety behind the wheel.

The problem, Morrow is quick to point out, isn't with Rebecca. The problem is with 16- and 17-year-old drivers in general.

"They don't have the experience, especially with all the traffic," Morrow said. "They don't have reaction skills," Morrow said.

"There are few kids with whom Rebecca is allowed to drive. I make her wait until they have more experience."

Morrow's abundant caution is backed by national statistics and recent New Orleans area experience.

Although vehicular deaths involving teens have declined over the past 30 years, in part because of stricter driver's license programs, traffic crashes remain the leading cause of death and injury among American teens.

Last year, 3,656 drivers between 16 and 20 years of age died in motor vehicle crashes, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. In 2002, the teen death toll was 3,723.

In Louisiana, teens between 15 and 20 years old make up less than 9 percent of the state's drivers but are involved in more than 14 percent of fatal accidents and 16 percent of injury crashes, according to the Louisiana Highway Safety Commission.

"The problem has always been that teenagers are inexperienced and immature," said Carolyn Gorman, vice president of the Insurance Information Institute, a nonprofit group that among other things tracks trends in teen driving.

"They do pretty well under normal circumstances, but when something unexpected happens -- a sharp turn on a road or a pothole -- they don't always know what to do. That inexperience coupled with the fact that they think they are immortal is a toxic combination."

On the north shore, reminders of the mortality of teenage drivers have come with tragic frequency over the past year.

Paul Nagin, 16, of Mandeville, died last month when he lost control of his car and slammed into an oncoming vehicle. Authorities said he was driving at a "high rate of speed." The other driver died, as did Paul's 16-year-old passenger, Brandon Rushing.

Months earlier, a 16-year-old Covington girl was ejected from her friend's SUV when her 17-year-old friend lost control of the vehicle on Interstate 12. And an 18-year-old Covington woman was killed when her 17-year-old friend, who had been drinking, lost control of his car on U.S. 190. Neither victim had been wearing a seat belt.

Dr. Martin Drell, head of infant, child and adolescent psychiatry at the Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center, says the high rate of teenage deaths confirms to him the unique nature of the adolescent brain. Because it doesn't fully develop until early adulthood, teens are less able to control their impulses, regulate their emotions and assess risks.

"Part of being teenager with a unique mind is a certain invulnerability, the feeling that 'I'm special and nothing is going to happen to me. Other people may be dying but it's not going to happen to me.' "

Numerous studies support the high-risk nature of teens, with those in the 16-to-19-year-old age range more at risk for motor vehicle crashes than any other age group.

Adolescents are more likely than older drivers to speed, run red lights, make illegal turns, ride with an intoxicated driver and drive while under the influence of alcohol or drugs, according to the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. And compared with other drivers, they have the lowest rate of seat belt use.

Distractions are another factor in the high rate of crashes caused by everything from cell phone use to loud music to too many passengers.

"As soon as they get their license, they want to fill up the car with their friends, turn up the music and go cruising," said Vernon Stanfield, a Victor Manning Driving School instructor.

In his classes, Stanfield likens driving to playing a musical instrument or a sport: You won't be good at it unless you practice, practice, practice.

"It takes a good five years to recognize all the hazards and really train your brain to drive a car," he said. "It's a repetitive behavior."

According to the American Automobile Association, basic vehicle control skills such as turning, steering and stopping are achieved quite quickly. But perceptual, judgment, and decision-making skills take longer to acquire.

For example, compared with more experienced drivers, the agency says, novices concentrate eye movements in a smaller area, refer to their rearview mirror less often, and look closer in front and to the right of the vehicle. And advanced skills such as driving at night and during rush hour, detecting threats and recovering from a skid also take extensive practice to master.

Nationally, AAA has found that about 75 percent of the fatal crashes involving 15- to 20-year-old drivers were caused by driver error or other factors related to the driver's behavior. Factors most often noted were failure to stay in the proper lane or on the road, and driving too fast for conditions.

Helping teenagers understand what makes them such high-risk drivers is one of the goals of the Charity Hospital driver's education trauma program, and from the feedback that program director Bridget Gardner, a trauma nurse, has received, it seems to be making a difference.

"It changes their perspective that anything can happen to them at any time of the day," Gardner said. "When they leave here, they understand that even if they're careful, they still have to watch out for the next person. Even if they buckle up, there's a happy hour at every restaurant or hotel."

The program is geared to high school sophomores, many of whom have or are in the process of getting their learner's permits. A permit allows minors to drive while being accompanied by a licensed adult for a minimum of 90 days.

John Buckman, 16, says he never truly understood his vulnerability behind the wheel until he and his Brother Martin High School classmates participated in the Charity program.

The group visited the hospital's trauma center, where they viewed crash footage, attended lectures and observed patients in the intensive care unit. Many were crash victims barely alive.

They also heard from a man who sustained serious head injuries when he crashed his car while driving drunk. He was 18 at the time. Now 32, he stutters, drags one leg and can neither hold a job nor maintain relationships.

"All the people that talked to my class that day made an impact on how I drive and what decisions I make," John said. "It made me realize that driving isn't all fun and games. It's a serious thing and a big responsibility."

The level of that responsibility hit home last Sunday morning. John and his friends were driving south on Power Boulevard on their way to play golf when a man driving a truck made an illegal left turn at West Esplanade Avenue and plowed into his Nissan Pathfinder.

The SUV was turned onto its side, golf clubs strewn on the road and one boy's cell phone thrown several yards into a church parking lot. All were wearing their seat belts. They were able to escape when one of John's friends kicked through the windshield.

"I didn't even see the car coming," John said of the truck that hit him. "It came to me as a complete shock. It taught me to always expect the unexpected. There might always be that one . . . driver that's not paying attention that could hit you."

Dr. Stephen Hales, a New Orleans pediatrician with six grown sons, says parents must be firm in setting and enforcing driving rules for their adolescent children, even if it means losing the convenience of having a child drive. More than anything, they must take a strong stand against underage drinking, whether their child has a driver's license or not.

"Driving is a privilege, not a right," said Hales. "To simply endorse a child's driving because that child has reached a certain age is to expose that child to risks that we as parents should not allow."

When Hales' sons began driving, he required them to sign a contract, the terms of which included promises to drive sober, wear a seat belt and drive defensively. If they wanted to keep their licenses, they also had to do well in school.

"They had to show evidence of good judgment and maturity, or their privilege to drive could be revoked," he said. Admittedly, there were occasional lapses -- for example, not checking in with him or their mother at designated times. Taking their licenses away made them realize that driving was not something to be taken lightly.

"There has to be a clear understanding as to what the expectations are and what the consequences are," he said, "and parents need to feel comfortable setting limits and saying no."

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For more information about the Charity Hospital driver's education trauma program, call (504) 903-8813.