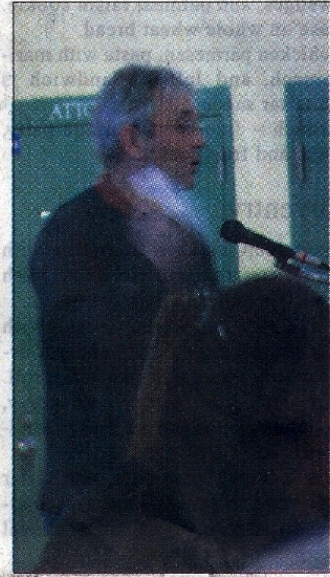


Learning life's lessons the hard way



Angelena Chapman/Daily Times

Left: Coventry High students listen as they are told first hand about the dangers of drinking and driving. A group of inmates spoke with the students, re-living their own mistakes in hopes that these kids won't make the same wrong decisions.

Right: Dan Converse, the father of a young man who was killed in a drunk driving accident, spoke on the horrors of losing a child this way.

RIDOC Zero Fatalities Program aimed at young drivers

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CRANSTON—A group of high school students heard lessons from a group of young people that, unfortunately, had to learn them the hard way.

Coventry High School traveled this month to the John J. Moran Medium Security Facility in Cranston to hear from a panel of inmates as a part of the Zero Fatalities Project.

The Rhode Island Department of Corrections (RIDOC) has partnered with the Rhode Island Attorney General's Office, MADD-RI, Rhode Island Family Court, the Rhode Island Police Chiefs Association, the Rhode Island State Police and the Rhode Island Department of Transportation since 2008 to offer the presentation to middle and high school aged students.

Special Assistant Attorney General Ania Hopkins began the presentation to the large group of Coventry students, a number of whom are seniors this year.

She talked about choices and decisions.

She talked about their upcoming prom and Hopkins told students that she thought some of them would drink that night, but as far as that decision and the decision to drink and drive, "Think before you make that decision," Hopkins told them.

Not a lot of people would make the decision to kill three people, she used in one example, but that was a real case that happened here in Rhode Island, she told them.

Driving is not a right she told them, but a privilege, "that we get to revoke from you."

At one point Hopkins apologized for

sounding "mean," but told students that nothing bothered her more than to see someone who has their whole life ahead of them "who ruins it because they made a stupid choice."

Hopkins told the students that if they were 18 years old and decided to drink and drive and act like an "adult"—"we'll treat you that way."

Hopkins gave examples of different things the students could do in the next few years either "here" as inmates or while at college. They could attend classes, she told them, "at college or here," showing slides of the classes held in prison versus a class at a regular school.

She told them she hoped they were "gutsy enough to make the right choice."

Rhode Island General Law 31-27-2.2 states that when someone is found guilty of "driving under the influence of liquor or drugs, resulting in death" they are to be imprisoned in the state prison "for not less than five (5) years and for not more than fifteen (15) years, in any unit of the adult correctional institutions at the discretion of the sentencing judge."

The first inmate to present was Kellie, 32, who has two children who are 13 and 12 years old.

Her 12-year old child has Down syndrome, she told the students, and her kids now, because she is in prison are basically raising themselves because she could not be there "in the hardest, most important times."

"All I do is eat and sleep," Kellie said, talking about how she had gained 100 pounds.

She talked about the day of the accident, not only had she been drinking, but it was raining and snowing and hailing that day.

"I don't have any memory," she said about what happened, but it was the first day that Kellie had ever met the young girl who accompanied her in the truck and who died

that day.

The young girl who died, who Kellie said would have been 21 now, was stuck in the truck an extra two minutes and was badly burned when there was an explosion, Kellie said.

Kellie herself was internally decapitated and now has pins holding her head on, she said. She said she used to be "so pretty," before the accident, but now she hasn't looked in a mirror in five years, saying that no one wanted to be her friend and no man would want to be with her.

She took the life of a child she said "and now mine are at home raising themselves," she said. "It sucks—don't drink and drive, don't!"

Christopher, 22, was not drinking that night, but "was always down to party," he told Coventry students.

His conviction was different than the other presenters, for reckless driving with death resulting.

He hit and killed a man and "fled and drove home," he said.

Even though he wasn't drinking, he talked about the habits that he had formed that had caused him to become "more and more careless."

Now, a man's life had been cut short and "two families were heartbroken," Christopher said.

"The habits you form now stay with you a lifetime. What never could happen to me could happen to you," Christopher told students.

Patrick, 25, told students, "I killed my three best friends," retelling the story of how it was shortly after his 21 birthday and he wanted to use his ID for the first time.

They left the bar around 10 p.m. he said and 10 minutes later his three best friends were dead.

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Drinking, driving leads to harsh realities

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Swerving off a five-foot cliff after going 60 miles per hour through a stop sign, Patrick said that he was sentenced to 35 years with 15 to serve and now had "the distinguished name of a monster."

Patrick has a son and one of the men who died also had a son. Patrick's son now lives out of state and he only sees him twice a year.

"I hope you don't drink and drive because this can happen to everybody," he said.

Anthony, 27, told his story that included his dad being sick with cancer, having his stomach pumped when he was only 16 from excessive drinking, being the captain of his football team, excelling while in boot camp, but then being discharged from the Marine Corp after only nine months because of alcohol.

He talked about his dad dying when he was 19, but even after that quitting drinking, meeting his wife, having a daughter and then finding out he was about to have twin boys.

He was three times over the legal limit, he told the students, not remembering how he traveled across the state in less than 30 minutes when he hit and killed a 70-year old woman who was crossing the street, "a grandmother, a wife, a mother," he said.

Patrick, who has tried to send letters through Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) to the woman's family, said that it took his own mother 18 months to start talking to him again.

Patrick told the students that his hope for them was that they "never ever even touch alcohol—never even look at the bottle."

"Once you take that first drink, it's going to ruin your life," he said.

He told the students "take advantage of your future."

Anderson, 24, told students, "I had goals, but was more interested in partying."

While his "head was straight," he told them, "I ended up going down the wrong path."

He said that his family was very supportive of him and his decisions, but he didn't listen, "I wanted a reputation of being cool," he said.

He was driving too fast, a cop had tried to pull him over, but he didn't see him, when he hit a stone wall.

Neither Anderson, nor his best friend had their seatbelts on.

While Anderson said he had 1,000's of friends before the accident, "Now, I only have my family members," he said.

"There are a lot of people here," Anderson said, "but it is the most loneliest place in the world."

His friends he said have all moved on with their lives.

The father of 16 year old Jonathan, who died as the passenger in a drunk driving crash, Dan Converse, told the story of driving to the scene, which was only half a mile from their house, and not being allowed to see his son's body.

He asked the students to picture their parents walking around their rooms looking at their things or picking out what they would wear at their funerals.

"You're killing each other," Converse also told them.

Converse showed a picture of his son, who was also drunk the night of the crash, with a sign behind him that said, "In life there are no make-up exams. Choose carefully."

He told students that he wanted them to go home that night and talk to their parents about what they heard and to write a contract.

The contract, negotiated, would be that their mother or father would pick them up when they called and that there would be lesser consequences than if they had to be picked up at the police station.

Coventry teacher Bill Lyons thanked the presenters and asked the inmates when they got out to "redeem their lives."

He told the Times that he thinks the program, which he has attended with Coventry for four years, is working.

Lyons said he had never seen the panel that presented on this visit.

The Coventry students would all take part in an exit interview and discuss what they heard in classes later that week.

The day of the May 6 prom, the topic of drinking and driving will also be addressed in an assembly, Lyons said.

Donna Hutson who helps organizing the program for Coventry said that she thought it is a program that "all students should go through."