

Youth board tackles reckless teens behind the wheel

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Teens and reckless driving have been headline stories across the state over the past year.

And a tragic incident in Bristol, which killed four teens, served as the catalyst for efforts, including new legislation, to put the brakes on any further tragedies.

And next Tuesday, the United Way of West Central Connecticut youth board will do its part to save its peers. The board tackles the topic, "Behind the Wheel:

Reckless Teen Driving" at its annual youth forum.

The event, which will be held at Bristol Eastern High School next Tuesday from 6:30 to 8 p.m. will feature several speakers including Mrs. Mary Ellen Gosselin, officer Brad Schaffrick of the Bristol police department, John Tschummi, paramedic Sharon Kenney, and Department of Motor Vehicles commissioner Robert Ward, who also serves as co-chair of the Governor's Teen Driving

Task Force.

The youth board is made up of students and advisors from Bristol Eastern, Bristol Central, St. Paul Catholic, Lewis S. Mills, Plainville, and Terryville High schools. And the board members developed the theme of the forum themselves.

"We were all hit hard by the summer teen driving accidents," said Ali Read, a youth board member from Bristol Eastern when asked what led the board to pursue this particular topic.

"Too many of us have been personally affected by a fellow student and friend being injured or killed in an accident," Liz Sasson of Plainville High School said. "There needs to be a change."

"We thought we should do something in which we would try and inform young drivers... about reckless driving," said Lynn D'Ambrosi, a senior at St. Paul Catholic High School.

"We want to make sure that we don't lose any more

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friends or family members, so we reached out to the kids and are doing our best to prevent future accidents," said Ali

Paige Borda, a student from Terryville High School, "It is a good topic that many can relate to and need to learn lessons from."

"I think teens need to hear from other teens, not just from parents and adults, that we are in need of a serious reality check,"

said Lynn.

"Teens need to learn that they aren't invincible and that accidents will occur if they aren't more responsible. Teenagers need to realize that while they are in a car, their life and the lives of their passengers are in their hands. Teenagers need to be safer and responsible," said Liz. "If the recent crashes weren't enough of a wake up call, we are hoping this forum will be."

The speakers were selected by the board

because they thought they would add incite into the topic, said Paige.

"In general, many of the students have gotten to know the parents, the friends, and survivors of crashes. It wasn't a problem trying to find speakers, and in some respect— that's somewhat of a sad reality," said Liz.

"We wanted speakers with all different view points so that we wouldn't be repeating the same old thing over and over," said Lynn.

As they prepared to teach others, the youth board members learned some lessons as well.

Ali said: "I knew already that teens are the most reckless drivers. But this forum has shown me to what extent this statistic is true. It made me think twice about how careful I plan on being once I start driving."

"I have learned that there are many ways to get people to help out our whole state and not just our own little communities. We can reach out to everyone

because everyone has experienced something to do with the topic of reckless driving," said Paige.

"I learned that we can make a difference," said Liz. "We have already received a lot of positive (feedback) towards this event. It was sad discussing what has happened, but it also a good experience. We can all set an example for future teenager drivers."

Ultimately, Ali said she hopes "kids will realize the seriousness of their actions and they will walk away

from this experience saying 'wow.'"... We hope the kids will be able to realize what dangers face them on the road.

Paige said she wants to convey to her peers "the big message of how dangerous careless driving can be and to stop wonderful people from losing their lives over stupid mistakes... They need to learn how to be responsible drivers, so we can prevent accidents."

Comments? Email mchaiken@BristolObserver.com.