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Conveying the horror of crashes

Crumbled wrecks littering auto grave yards don't tell the whole story.

Motor vehicle crashes are horribly violent. That was the message of the day last Tuesday from IMPACT, the nonprofit whose mission is to eliminate tragedies caused by inexperienced drivers through awareness, education and legislation, a message delivered the same day as the deadly wreck involving five Griswold High School students.

Mourning Parents ACT Inc., better known as IMPACT, was founded in Connecticut in 2002 by three families who lost teenagers in separate crashes in a two-week period within a 25-mile radius. Its membership has grown with each new deadly crash. The group's goal is to share personal stories of tragedy and educate young drivers.

IMPACT speakers never mince words. They relate shocking statistics, risk factors, and tell teenagers what happens to a human body in a car crash. Then they tell them what the state is doing to protect them and what they can do to protect themselves and their friends

So last Tuesday, on the second day of Connecticut's Teen Safe Driving Awareness week, IMPACT asked the state's youngest drivers and their parents to celebrate by pledging to become more informed about the risks of teen driving and riding.

To facilitate the discussion, IMPACT explained that when a vehicle hits another object there are three distinct impacts, the reason why most motor vehicle deaths are caused by blunt force trauma.

Whatever the vehicle hits brings it to a stop. But the bodies of the driver and passengers continue to travel at the same rate of speed the car was travelling before it came to a stop. The bodies slam into whatever stops them.

Maybe, hopefully, a seat belt or an airbag. But it can be the dash board, windshield, steering wheel, or even another passenger in the vehicle.

IMPACT's description is cruelly vivid. Rear passengers who are not buckled in become catapults. Vital organs — the heart, lungs, liver and spleen — slam into the sternum and rib cage. Brains whiplash from the front to the back of skulls.

People die.

Group brings high impact message

FROM E1

It is a horrific but life-saving message, said Sherry Chapman, one of IMPACT's founders who was already struggling last Tuesday before she heard the news about the Griswold car crash. Tuesday was the eighth anniversary of Chapman's 19-year-old son Ryan's death in a car crash.

Her first thought was "Oh my goodness we cannot work fast enough," said Chapman, about receiving the call about the Griswold wreck.

IMPACT volunteers — parents and siblings of teenagers killed in car crashes — have spoken to thousands of high school students across the state over the years — but never at Griswold High.

"We are very blunt and honest with students," said Chapman. "They almost experience the devastation firsthand hearing the stories. ... No one wants to die in that manner. ... It's more violent than being shot with a gun. And they don't want their parents up on the stage with us."

There are three common elements in every crash that links the IMPACT members: a teenage driver, teenage passengers, and speed.

The nonprofit's teen driving safety program should be a required presentation at every high school in the state. It is powerful, graphic, disturbing and it works.

"We get feedback from the kids, sometimes even months later," said Chapman, explaining that the message sinks in for many of them.

It is exhausting, she said, to share painfully personal details about a loved one's horrific death.

"We wouldn't put ourselves through this if we weren't absolutely convinced we're making a difference," she said. "I know we make a difference."

What a wonderful gift Chapman is giving. Ann Baldelli is associate editorial page editor.

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