

Tough Program Deals With Tough Problem To Keep Drivers Safe

SAFE, Inc. partners with DA's office to protect young drivers

BY LAURA LANE

The auditorium at Glen Cove High School was packed, but it was totally silent. Seniors appeared to be a bit stunned by *Choices and Consequences*. The program, which addresses the dangers of reckless driving and driving under the influence, is brought to the high school by SAFE, Inc.'s School Committee who partner annually with the Nassau County District Attorney's office.

The DA's office sent Assistant District Attorney Michael Bushwack from the Vehicular Crimes Bureau on April 20 to speak to students. As someone who didn't appear to be all that much older than the seniors, he was an excellent speaker and candidly shared a great deal of information using statistics and real life tragedies. His goal was to impress upon students that safe driving is more than not drinking or doing drugs. It's also about driving safely within the speed limit and always keeping your eyes on the road.

"You don't have to be drunk or high to go to jail - you can just be acting like an idiot," he said. "DWI and reckless driving are the number one causes of death for people between 15 and 24 and males are twice as likely to die. In America someone dies every 30 minutes in an alcohol related crash and someone is injured every two minutes."

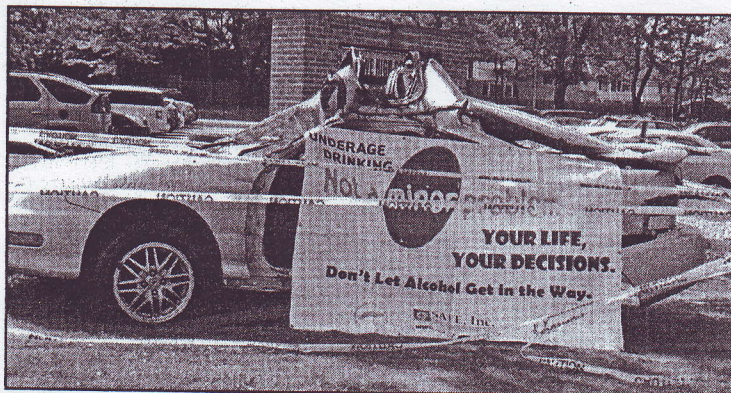
He suggested teens put their cell phones in the glove box and reminded them that when texting and driving if you hit and kill someone you will be charged with manslaughter.

On the lawn near the parking lot The DA's office loaned a crashed car to Glen Cove High School. It acted as a sober reminder of what could happen to those choosing not to drive safely. But the car wasn't the only visual used to encourage teens to drive safely.

Herbert Martinez, a young man in a wheelchair, was responsible in 2008 for the death of two of his best friends when he was speeding and driving recklessly after leaving school grounds for lunch. He said he was driving recklessly to avoid being late for class. Back then he was the



Bringing together a successful program at GCHS were from left, Dr. Sharon Harris, director of SAFE, Inc.; Liz Augner, Choices & Consequences program coordinator, Vehicular Crimes Bureau; Michael Bushwack, Nassau County assistant district attorney, Vehicular Crimes Bureau; and Nassau County Police Department Lieutenant Gus Kalin.



A Crash Car provided by the NC District Attorney's office to emphasize to students what can happen if they do not drive safely.

Photos by Laura Lane

same age as most of the seniors in the auditorium.

"It's better to be late to where you are going than to never get there," he said. "Driving is a privilege."

Martinez's words were also displayed

on a screen simultaneously as he spoke because it was hard to understand him. His crash caused him to suffer from severe brain injury but he said he felt fortunate because after the crash he couldn't speak at all for a very long time. His

tragedy occurred because his reckless driving caused him to lose control of his car and hit a dumpster full of concrete. Herbert survived because he had a seat belt on. His friends were not so fortunate. He was charged with negligent homicide and has been living ever since with the guilt of knowing that he caused the death of his best friends. Martinez stressed that he hadn't been drinking or doing drugs but that didn't matter. He was driving recklessly.

Bushwack asked students what they considered to be drugs. He said that often teens take what they consider not to be drugs before getting behind the wheel - muscle relaxers and pain medication. He asked students how to get sober faster and many students said the answer was only "time."

Another segment of the program included a skit presented by Glen Cove students where they re-enacted a driving situation where passengers encouraged a driver to drink and engage in other reckless driving. Nassau County Police Lieutenant Gus Kalin "responded to the scene of the crash," explaining to students what the police procedures and tests would be in a real situation.

Michael Banks, the "driver," a Glen Cove junior, wore fatal vision goggles to experience what it would be like if he were a drunk or impaired driver being forced to take those tests. The few laughs from some of the seniors sounded half-hearted and hollow as they watched Banks stumble across the stage.

The seniors not only heard the stories of people that caused accidents but also saw slides of the victims of horrific Long Island accidents. Some looked away at the graphic accident scenes and mangled cars. Many of the students had probably read about many of these accidents but seeing what police saw was not the same experience.

"It was crazy how people died in the accidents and it makes me want to be a better and safer driver when I get my license," said Stephan Stephans, 18. "This opened my eyes up."

Melissa Vargas, 18, said she found the picture of a car wrapped around a pole disturbing. "I think the real stories really helped me understand all of this more," she said.