

1st Place Driver Safety Scholarship Essay: Jacee Benefield

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Did you know drivers are 23 times more likely to be in an accident if texting while driving? What is even scarier is that 77% of young drivers are confident in their ability to text while driving! Too many young people do not see how sending one simple message can become a big deal. I mean, as teenagers we send messages all the time. Some of us have even mastered the art of typing a text without our eyes ever looking at our phone screens. So really no harm can be done, right?

This perspective held by so many of my peers is what first led me and others in my school's chapter of Family, Career, and Community Leaders of America, a career and technical student organization, to make a change. I wanted to inform my friends, peers, and community of the dangers of texting while driving and encourage them to take the pledge against it. I had multiple

meetings with my advisor to determine how I could put a campaign together that would be effective within my school. How would we get high school students to understand that their actions behind the wheel could have severe consequences?

I, along with two other FCCLA members, started our community awareness project entitled "LOL Is it really worth it? Because no one is laughing out loud now". Throughout the 2013-2014 school year, we did multiple presentations at FCCLA meetings, class meetings, and a Junior Ambassador meeting. We presented the information that we had learned while researching the dangers of texting while driving to each group of students, admitting that the statistics were just as shocking to us. To begin each presentation, we handed out a small survey, asking everyone whether they had ever sent a text message behind the wheel, if so how frequently they engaged in this behavior, and what consequences they believed this action could have. Almost every person admitted to having sent a text message before! Then we put on a small, fake accident using a tri-fold poster we had designed to look like a car. The lights were low and music was turned up, just two girls jamming out to Taylor Swift on their way to a friend's house. As the driver looked down to send a message, she swerved, hitting a tree. Police sirens replace the sound of the music and laughter is replaced by the driver screaming at her best friend in the passenger seat to wake up as the lights come back up. Only the passenger was killed on impact. We prepared the presentation to be presented by three people, all explaining the dangers from

3 different perspectives. The first speaker discussed the statistics involved. She would explain that the minimal time it takes to respond to a message is five seconds, and while that may not appear to be a long period of time, it enough to time to travel the entire length of a football field. During this time we also handed out a sheet that included all the statistics that we stated during the presentation as well as others that we had learned. The driver then emerged from behind the car as the second speaker. This perspective became much more personal as she explained the difficulty of overcoming the emotional burden left behind by the accident. While the wreck was not intentional, she explained that consequences would still be faced legally as well. This was the time when we discussed the laws that are coming into place throughout surrounding cities and eventually our state. Throughout the campaign, I truly began to understand how necessary it is for laws to be in place against texting while driving. I acted as the passenger and third speaker during our presentations. This portion was also meant to be personal. It was my goal to make our audience realize just how that simple message did not just affect the two of us in the car, but also our family and friends. I discussed the multiple stages of grieving that family members will typically go through after the loss of a loved one, specifically the effect the loss of a young child has on parents or legal guardians. I also explained how it is everyone's responsibility to prevent the driver from sending a message. If I am the passenger and I say nothing at all, that sends a message as well. A message to the driver that what he or she is doing is okay, that I do not mind. As passengers in any

vehicle it is essential that we do not become enablers, but instead act as reminders for the driver that whatever they have to say can wait.

As we wrapped up the presentation, every individual in the audience received a brightly colored thumb band that read "It Can Wait". These were to serve as a reminder whenever one was tempted to pick up their cell phone while on the road. We also handed out tee-shirts to the individuals that participated most during the discussions that had our campaign title on the front and "Don't Text and Drive" on the back. The opportunity then arose for any individual to go online and take the pledge, sponsored by AT&T. The majority of those in the audience took the pledge. These individuals then helped us to continue spreading the word around our school campus.

My group of three took this campaign to the FCCLA State Leadership Conference and competed in a STAR event, Illustrated Talk. Not only did we receive a gold medal for our presentation and proof of impact, but we also received a bid to the National Leadership Conference that summer in Orlando, Florida. In Orlando, we became the first group from Arab High School to receive a FCCLA national gold medal!

However, the insight we received surrounding this ever growing issue was more important than either of the medals. In today's society, technology is essential and rapidly transforming the world around us. While this technology can hurt us, like the way it potentially can if we chose to text and drive, it can also be the way we help others and start the movement to end this issue. By

utilizing social media, television, radio, and other forms of technology, it is possible to spread the word. It is possible to make a difference in our communities and state. Encourage individuals to take the pledge, to take a stand. As these individuals do so, they in turn will also encourage others to do. No message is worth the hurt it can inflict. "LOLJ" is not worth it. Texting can wait until the car is in park and turned off. By doing presentations like discussed above and continuing to discuss the dangers and consequences, we make an impact that can make ourselves and those around put the phone down and put an end to texting while driving.

Poster used during presentations.

Tee shirts with project title:





Back of shirt