Brain injury awareness part of driver education

By Tom Works
SPECIAL TO THE TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

WORCESTER — Area teenagers are receiving a different aspect of driving education through a new program aimed at increasing awareness of brain injuries associated with vehicle accidents.

The program, Keep Every Youth Safe, is running an hour-long presentation incorporated in the driver education programs at schools in Central Massachusetts, focusing on why teens get involved in crashes, what happens to drivers and passengers during collisions, how injuries impact the brain and the consequences of those injuries. The program also focuses on how drivers can prevent crashes and avoid the injuries.

The program incorporates a PowerPoint presentation and a film that showcases interviews with people who have suffered brain injuries in car accidents and the detrimental effects those injuries have had on their lives.

Katrina Sullivan, program director, said in a telephone interview it is important for new drivers to know how their lives will change forever if they suffer a brain injury. “These kids are psyched about driving,” Ms. Sullivan said. “But you lose a lot of privileges and choices when you get a brain injury.”

Ms. Sullivan was originally hired by the Brain Injury Association of America to start a recreation program for brain injury survivors, and later worked in their prevention department. But for years she wanted to begin a program that would inform young people on the oft-forgotten perils of surviving a car accident but with heavily debilitating injuries.

“Brain injuries are the leading cause of death in these kids’ age group,” Ms. Sullivan said, “and car crashes are the main cause of these brain injuries. So they are obviously linked.”

Saying the area of the presentation that stands out the most for driving students are the interviews with actual brain injury survivors, Ms. Sullivan said she has had to adapt to the growing popularity of her program. “When we first started, we liked to actually have the survivors come and speak to the classes. But as we expanded it became more and more difficult for them to go from school to school. We couldn’t ask that of them.

“So what we did was film the interviews and then play the film clips for each class at each school. We intersperse the film clips depending on what the theme of the class is.”

Ms. Sullivan said she hired a professional to make the film who has been the only person to help her with the presentations.

“I work pretty much alone with this. I do have a college student who assists me, but besides that, I’m by myself.”

But Ms. Sullivan doesn’t have any complaints, saying that she is happy to do the work. “I love bringing this information to kids, they really seem to like it and are very interactive. They come up to me sometimes after my presentation and tell me about people they know who have brain injuries. There are even some students, mostly ones who do sports, who tell me they feel they may have suffered brain injuries because they’ve had some of the same symptoms as the brain injury survivors.”

One of the new components Ms. Sullivan has added, to increase student participation in the presentation, is called an empathy experience in which she brings in tools that give the beginning drivers an idea of what a brain injury can do to even the most rudimentary physical activities.

“We have the students put on gloves and a button-down shirt and then have them try to button the shirt,” Ms. Sullivan said. “We also get them to try and dial a phone with no hands. We even give students goggles to wear that only see in prisms and then get them to try and walk in a straight line.”

Ms. Sullivan said her ultimate goal is to incorporate the program in every school.