

LIFE LESSONS

High schools host assemblies on importance of safe driving.

By AMANDA STRINDBERG STAFF WRITER

Most days it's difficult for Dr. David Sabet to breathe. He misses the gaggle of girls in his home and the way his daughter stuck stamps on the wrong side of the envelope. He misses her smile and how his little Jill said "I love you Dad, muah!" always blowing him a kiss as she said goodbye.

Sabet misses his little girl.

"It's inconceivable that we are living life without her," the San Clemente resident said. Since the death of his 17-year-old daughter last May, Sabet has begun speaking out about teen driving safety. Gillian (Jill) was killed in a car accident on the way to JSerra High School's spring dance. Last week Sabet spoke at a teendriving safety seminar at Capistrano Valley High School.

As prom season and the summer fun months approach, high schools across the region are grappling with how to get the message out to teens that inattention and wrong choices can destroy lives. Mock DUI crashes and town-hall-style meetings are a few of the ways schools are delivering that message.

Overall driving fatalities are up 8 percent since 1992. Drivers 15-20 years old account for 6.6 percent of licensed drivers, yet are involved in 14.6 percent of all fatal traffic collisions, said Will Funk, the county Sheriff's Department traffic safety programs coordinator.

In an effort to reduce these statistics, Capistrano Valley High School Parent Teacher Student Association members planned the teen driving safety meeting where Sabet spoke.

"Experience is the crucial thing," Funk said. "We are not picking on you teens. We are doing it for a reason."

HOPE EJECTED

Sabet, a podiatrist, spoke about the foundation, Journey-Safe, dedicated to reducing the number of needless tragedies such as Jill's through awareness and education.

About one year ago Sabet was on the way to the mountains for a weekend trip with his daughter. Feeling like the luckiest father in the world he asked Jill how long she would be willing to take time away from her myriad friends to spend a weekend with dad.

"Duh, Dad. Forever," she told him.

But Sabet didn't know forever would come so soon. Seven weeks after their fatherdaughter adventure Gillian's life was cut short on the way to her "Spring Fling" dance where she was to be crowned queen. Her boyfriend, Jonathan Schulte, 16, of Orange was also killed and four other teens were injured in the accident when the SUV they were riding in overturned on the San Joaquin Hills (73) Toll Road.

The driver of the car Jill was riding in wasn't intoxicated, he said. A 16-year-old driver's reach for a piece of gum and another teen's quick tug on the steering wheel unleashed a chain of events that shattered the lives of many.

"Our hopes and dreams were ejected from that vehicle," Sabet said.

Jill was the "spark plug" that held the family together, Sabet said. She had suffered her own loss when her older brother Jonathan died of leukemia.

In a family overwhelmed by grief, she had a sparkle that brought happiness into the home. "Now it's just too quiet," Sabet told the group of parents and teens. The proud father told the students to keep watch over one another.

"We don't want you to just be careful, we need you to take care of each other," he said. "We need you to keep your eyes on the road and on each other."

JUST A DRILL

In Lake Forest, El Toro High School students learned a similar lesson.

Juniors and seniors gathered on Toledo Way Monday morning to watch a horrific tragedy unfold.

It was supposed to be the night of their lives.

Instead, one teen's decision to drive after a few beers on prom night changed everything.

Dressed in gowns and tuxedos, students lay bloody and limp in the roadway, their friends and family hysterical.

"Wake up," one student said, shaking her friend who lie motionless next to a crumpled car. "Why? Why did this have to happen?"

The mock DUI crash – common to many high school campuses as prom approaches – was Friends Against Drinking and Driving's 50th staged collision. The county's police and fire departments, two ambulance companies, hospital dispatchers, trained trauma volunteers, a mortuary and tow company responded, performing their typical duties. The mock crash was based on a true accident that killed teens in South County, said firefighter/paramedic Steve Concialdi, founder of FADD. "I hope what you saw sticks with you," he told the students. "This was real and I hope it never happens to you."

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TEENAGE ROAD RISKS

Drivers 16-19 are four times more likely to crash. The motor vehicle death rate for male occupants ages 16-19 was nearly twice that of females in 2002. Teens have the lowest rate of seatbelt use. In 2003, 54 percent of teen deaths from motor vehicle crashes occurred on Friday, Saturday or Sunday; 42 percent occurred between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m.

Source: Centers for Disease
Control and Prevention

MORE ONLINE

For more information on the JourneySafe Foundation visit www.journeysafe.org