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Every Fifteen Minutes

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Dramatic DUI accident staged at Ukiah High

The smashed cars? Real. Firefighters, paramedics, coroners? Real. Broken Glass? Real.

The only unreal part of this scenario: the fake blood and the "victims-" Ukiah High students chosen by counselors to play the role of drunk and/or innocent youth involved in a fatal car accident.

"Every Fifteen Minutes" is a nationally acclaimed program hosted by the California Highway Patrol that depicts a real-time crash scene caused by a "drunken" teen driver.

More than nine months of preparation and multi-agency participation brought everything together on Wednesday for the UHS student body - assembled on the football bleachers for the beginning of a two-day event addressing the issues and consequences of driving under the influence.

Along with the CHP, Ukiah Fire, Ukiah Valley Fire, Mendocino County Sheriff's Office, Ukiah Police Department, Ukiah Ambulance and CalStar personnel created a chillingly real scenario of a two-vehicle collision involving cars filled with teens. Ukiah Valley Television, Ukiah Auto Dismantlers, North Coast Opportunities and Mendocino County Alcohol and Other Drug Program staff also provided support.

Tim McGraw's "Seventeen" plays on the loudspeakers as students settle into the bleachers. Two wrecked vehicles were placed on the track, positioned in a head-on collision. Suddenly there is a sound of squealing brakes and broken glass. Inside the cars, teens moan and look dazed, in various

stages of consciousness. One girl is slumped over the steering wheel of her Taurus.

The familiar, dispassionate voice of a 911 dispatcher and a citizen who reports the accident blazes over the airwaves. The dispatcher forwards the call to emergency responders, reporting six individuals with major injuries. Nervous giggling

comes from a few in the audience.

Seconds later, the shrill scream of real sirens can be heard on Low Gap Road. "Are we really doing this right now?" gasps a student to her friend.

In the Taurus, one girl begins sobbing. "Olivia, wake up! Please, somebody help!" Suddenly, fire engines, rescue vehicles and squad cars begin driving up the track toward the wreckage.

A young man emerges from the driver's seat of the second vehicle - a Buick. He is stumbling, simulating nausea. Emergency personnel go into action- a coordinated, macabre dance of life battling death. And Death - in the form of a hooded, spectral Grim Reaper (Charlie Kelly's alter ego) dispassionately surveys the scene.

Gurneys, backboards and the Jaws of Life are deployed. Windows are broken, with the helpless victims shielded from shattering glass by paper blankets. Paramedics ask victims to describe their conditions, and the audience is transfixed.

A CHP officer approaches the seemingly intoxicated driver of the second vehicle. "Have you been drinking anything?" he asks the young man, escorting him to the back of a squad car. Firefighters and paramedics attend to their charges, attempting to extricate victims and stabilize the injured. The girl in the front seat of the Taurus remains non-responsive.

"The coroner's here," says one of the firefighters. "Oh my God, it's a real body bag," says a spectator.

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As victims are moved into ambulances, firefighters begin to remove the driver of the Taurus, now clearly "deceased." The sheriff takes photos, makes notes on his clipboard, and the girl is placed into a red body bag, to gasps from the audience. Shortly thereafter, a van with blocked out windows appears and staff from the Eversole Mortuary take custody of the body as it is placed into the van and removed from the scene.

"Oh my gosh, here comes the helicopter," says a student. The blue and white CalStar chopper lands in the field and the most seriously injured victim is airlifted away.

A CHP officer then questions the intoxicated driver of the Buick, who admits to drinking "a couple of beers" and taking some "oxy's." He is given sobriety tests and summarily handcuffed and arrested.

"Until you walk in someone's shoes you don't know how this impacts them," says UHS Principal Dennis Willeford to the student body, noting that crisis counselors will be available to anyone who needs support. "Look out for each other today," he concludes.

But the day is just beginning. Following the crash, CHP officer Randy England visits classrooms and reads obituaries for the two victims who died in the collision.

The 16 participating students are taken to an overnight retreat organized by Ukiah Fire Administrative Secretary Kelly Dunham. Their parents attend a separate retreat - so victims and parents are separated for an entire day and night. The following day, the student body is assembled again, with mournful bagpipes in the assembly hall and two caskets on display. Judge Ann Moorman, the intoxicated driver, a District Attorney's Office lawyer and other guest speakers will help enact a "trial" and discuss the real-life ramifications of driving under the influence.

"This is by far the best program CHP offers," says England. "The highest risk for death for kids aged 15 to 20 is being involved in a traffic collision. This is the most realistic scenario without actually having to deal with the real thing."

Though the mileage death rate is the lowest ever for the state of California, England emphasizes the horror of teen drinking and driving. "No parent

should ever have to bury their child," England notes. "If you ask any law enforcement officer what the worst thing about their job is, they will say any tragedy involving youth. There's nothing more preventable than a DUI. If we change one life here today, the program will be a success."

As emergency personnel mop up the faux accident, Ukiah firefighter Joyce Boghossian takes a moment to reflect. "It's good this wasn't a real accident, but I had real tears," she notes.



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