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High-tech awareness



CAPTION: Laura Kirby/Daily Mining Gazette

Ontonagon High School junior Melodie Burke tries out a drunk driving simulator on the Save A Life Tour visit to the school last week. Preprogrammed levels on the machine represent levels of impairment from one to 30 beers, by slowing driver reaction times. "It was really hard. I hit a building," Burke said.

By Laura Kirby, DMG Writer

ONTONAGON — Five years ago, Brian Beldyga fell in love at a 7 Eleven.

"I was rushing for a frat and I was quite intoxicated when I met her," says the 26-year-old psychology graduate.

"She went to LaCrosse, Wis. and I went to Northern," he said. "I ended up proposing to her six weeks later."

When Beldyga lost his new fiance in a drunk driving accident just six months into their engagement, it was a tragedy in more ways than one, he explained.

The driver was 19 years old and had consumed just three beers.

"It was pretty much a worst-case scenario after that," Beldyga says. "I pretty much drank all the time."

After pulling himself out of an alcohol and drug binge, Beldyga said he had "one of those clarity moments" — a way to teach groups of young adults a simple message that has been ignored for too long: When friends are drunk, take the keys.





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"I had moved to Grand Rapids and started a job with Robert Kramer," he explained. As head of Grand Rapids-based Kramer Entertainment Inc., Kramer oversees more than 5,000 nationwide events which use interactive technology.

After learning Beldyga's story, he brought up the idea of a drunk driving simulator.

"You give me this and I will take it to the next level," was Beldyga's response.

A few years later, Beldyga is taking his million dollar drunk driving simulator around the nation. The project is in a collaboration with FAAC Inc. of Ann Arbor, the nation's leader in real-time, state-of-the-art technology training used for military and weapon simulations, and driver training courses.

The idea behind the Save A Life Tour is to discourage teenagers from getting behind the wheel by showing them how just a little booze can impair judgement while driving.

"It's really hard. I hit a building," said junior Melodie Burke after trying the simulator at Ontonagon High School last week.

Participants begin the experience 'sober' and on a small machine that helps vision adjust to the simulator screen.

When students progress to the real simulator, their reaction times start to become slowed by levels of impairment chosen by one of the Save A Life crew.

Levels one through 20 are preprogrammed by crew members and represent anywhere between one and 30 beers drank in their dulling effect on reaction times for drivers.

"I never tell them which level I've put it on, in fear of them thinking that the level would apply to the real world," Beldyga said. "If they know how many beers they've (drunk), they might use that to gauge how well they could drive in real life."

Large projection monitors show audiences the driver's view, a bird's eye view of their journey and an indicator showing the driver's impairment. With 180-degree field of vision, more than 87 miles of roadway, varying weather and random traffic, the experience is a realistic one, students at Ontonagon agreed.

Senior Stefanie Kocher ran a red light and almost hit a bus when she tried the simulator. Kocher said the impact of trying to drive drunk, and having a whole class watch how badly you drive, has been more effective than other awareness campaigns. "Everybody pays attention, more I think, than at assemblies," she said.

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