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DUI awareness program hits Segerstrom High

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SANTA ANA – More than 900 high school upperclassmen watched a staged drunken driving accident scene unfold Tuesday morning, complete with wrecked vehicles, interrogating police officers, paramedics, a bloodied driver and firemen removing the driver's deceased friend from a car.

Ten students from UC Irvine's Emergency Medicine Interest Group coordinated the event which took place at Segerstrom High School, with the help of the Santa Ana Police Department and Orange County Fire Authority.

Four police officers, six firemen, two paramedics and several UC Irvine students volunteered to re-enact the scene of a DUI accident, with the goal of deterring students from driving while under the influence. Two injury prevention specialists from Western Medical Center also volunteered to do makeup for the "victims," with a large, bloody gash on the driver's face.

"You get a little emotional watching it, because you kind of put your family or your friends or your loved ones in those situations, so it hits home for anyone," said Jamie Bates, activities director for Segerstrom High. "I feel like [the students] are at the age where they think they can do anything, and they don't have to suffer any consequences. ... They don't think about consequences when they're acting. They don't. And so this really was an eye-opener for a lot of them."

The accident scene included two wrecked vehicles donated by a towing company. Several teachers watched with their students as firemen cut the door off a car to reach a victim.

"I think it's a really powerful visual to see what really happens," said Shelby Stoewsand, a drawing and painting teacher. "I hope [the students] realize the situation they can get themselves into, or other people."

More Than Just A Drink started in 2008 and is put on by UC Irvine medical students every two years at local high schools, according to this year's director, Sari Lahham. The students coordinate the event date, set up the sound system and help in other logistical tasks.

The event included a speech by UC Irvine Medical Center attending physician Bharath Chakravarthy, who told the students a true story of a young man who "was not a partier" but attended a party, drove under the influence and killed a single mother of two children, ages 4 and 7.

Chakravarthy estimated that 75 percent of traumas seen at UC Irvine Medical Center, one of the few Level 1 trauma centers in Orange County, are due to motor vehicles. Of those, 40 to 50 percent involved alcohol, he said.

"All of this you see [before] you today really happens," he told the students. "It's real life stuff and I don't want it to happen to you."

Santa Ana Police Department Cpl. Mark Bell spoke to the students about driving under the influence and said that after just one beer, if they are stopped by an officer they will be arrested for DUI.

"We don't want your parents to have to come to a scene like this that's happened, or have to go to a hospital and be told that their son or daughter has been killed as a result of drinking and driving," he told them.

Bell, who has been with SAPD for 25 years, said that he loves DUI enforcement and has volunteered for the event about five times.

"It's the one detail ... that I actually feel that I make a difference," he said. "Every officer's goal [is] to save a life."