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Road safety focus of Street Legal program for students

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Forest Ohneck, 22, and Stephen Kelly, 18, both from the Spruce Grove area are former street racers who speak to teens about making the right decisions behind the wheel.

Sexsmith Secondary school students learned to make smart choices behind the wheel through a road safety program yesterday.

The Street Legal program presented by the Youth Initiatives and Education in Lifestyles and Driving (YIELD) Association was offered to Grade 12 students. Based out of Spruce Grove, the program is administered to various high schools teaching the message of making appropriate choices not only in their driving habits but also in their daily lives. This is the first time the program has come to the Grande Prairie area.

RCMP Const. Gord Buck hosted the program yesterday. He spent 12 years working with the Stony Plain Traffic and now works at the Edmonton International Airport.

"The whole gist of it is to get kids to make appropriate decision not only with their road safety and driving but lifestyle as well," he said. "Because what they are doing now could affect them for the rest of their lives."

The program included a short video, discussion and a question period. A non-active police car converted into a drag race car was on display outside the school. In the Edmonton area, participants can improve their driving skills through drag racing in a professional and safe driving.

"We just want to go out and educate the kids and go out get rid of some of the carnage on the highway," said Buck. "It's just about making the appropriate choices and where to race - at a track at a sanctioned place."

Sexsmith resident Bonnie Deane was instrumental in bringing the program to the area.

"There's a lot of young drivers in town," she said, noting her grandson attends Sexsmith Secondary. "We just want them to be safe and to drive responsibly and understand driving is a responsibility and it's not a right of passage."

She said the statistics of young people dying from car crashes between the ages of 17 and 25 are too high.

"Sometimes you don't get a second chance," said the grandmother of three and mother of two. "It's because of lack of education and experience. We're out there to do what we can to teach the kids on some safer habits. "They need to learn these things when they are young before the bad happens."

On the tour with Buck are two young men who learned first hand about the effects of street racing. In December 2008, Stephen Kelly, 18, and Forest Ohneck, 22, were caught racing each other outside of Spruce Grove heading toward Stony Plain.

Instead of paying a \$2,000 speeding ticket, having six months of driving probation and losing six demerit points, the young men joined the Street Legal program.

Now they share their story and experiences with teens not too much younger than they are.

"We talk about our experience," said Kelly. "And basically try to get kids off the street."

Ohneck and Kelly have a friend who was nearly killed from street racing and they bring that understanding to their discussions with high school students.

"Just from what we have seen so far and what our buddy has gone through," said Kelly. "It's pretty bad stuff."

Ohneck said they hope to continue with the program after their mandatory 250 hours of community service are completed.

"Within the last three weeks alone in Alberta, three kids have been buried from street racing," said Ohneck. "The more kids we can get this message across to, the more kids we can impact."

Sexsmith Secondary school principal Randy Horneland said a large percentage of students who attend the rural school drive to school and for longer distances. He said the timing is right for the program.

"This is a prime time of year as well right before grad," said Horneland. "In any big high school or school like this, we can name off the kids in the past years who have had accidents and some who have not made it. If we can do any thing to prevent that kind of thing then that's all good."

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