



NEWSLETTER APRIL 2013

EL RANCHO UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

SAFE SCHOOLS/HEALTHY STUDENTS GRANT INITIATIVE

Dear Mom and Dad,

Every 15 minutes, someone dies as the result of an alcohol related collision. Today, I died - and I never got the chance to tell you...



Grim Reaper, Grim Words, Grim Reality as students at El Rancho High School were offered a real-life experience without the real life risks. A powerful, emotionally charged program that took El Rancho administrators, teachers, students, and law enforcement personnel nearly a year to stage, came to life on April 17 and 18 at the school. The program, called *Every 15 Minutes*, was made possible through the Safe Schools/ Healthy Students grant initiative. It's a program designed to dramatically demonstrate to teens the potentially dangerous consequences of drinking and/or texting while driving. Its realism challenged the kids to think about the horrific results of risky behavior behind the wheel of a vehicle. ERUSD personnel who worked with various agencies to bring the presentation to life used 29 students to represent crash victims, the drunk driver, and 24 "living dead". Organizers praised the team effort that brought the presentation to life, including many community partners who made the realism of events possible.

The program began with the Grim Reaper pulling one student out of class every 15 minutes as a police officer read the student's obituary to the class. Those pre-selected students then returned to the classroom as the "living dead" in full make-up, a black t-shirt, and a chalk outline of a body placed on the floor. For the remainder of the day, the students didn't interact with their peers, and remained overnight in the care of school volunteers and mental health teams to further simulate the notion to family and friends that they are now deceased.



The other highly graphic component, utilizing Pico Rivera firefighters, police officers, and other first responders, was a simulated crash between a car, "driven drunk" by student John Olivas with passengers Amber Garcia and Veronica Torres, colliding with a car "driven" by Samantha Herrera with Aiyana Leal Robles as her "injured" passenger. Herrera was later pronounced "dead" at the hospital. Amber Garcia played the student who was thrown from the passenger seat of the car and laid "dead" on the asphalt. Special Ed teacher, Paul Brandt, played the role of the Grim Reaper, hovering about the scene. Ambulances arrived to take the injured, covered in fake blood to a local hospital and a funeral hearse removed the dead student to the morgue, while the drunk driver was transported to jail for booking and a mock trial at the courthouse. The student body of ERHS observed most of the action, and while students first reacted with giggles and restlessness, they were soon drawn into the realistically staged drama.



One of the more powerful moments of the exercise was when the simulated dead and injured retreated to a workshop facility to be led through a visualization of their own death followed by the writing of a letter to parents that began with, "Today I died. I never got to tell you..." A MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) speaker joined the retreat to give her testimony of losing her mother to a teenaged drunk driver. At the retreat, all of the students were reunited where they got to wear simulator goggles, which allowed them to experience firsthand the feeling of alcohol and drug impairment. A video recounting the story of accident victim Jacqueline Saburido served as a powerful testimony to the consequences of drunk driving. The focus of the assembly was to heighten awareness that alcohol, drugs, or distracted driving affects a whole community of family and friends.

Throughout the program's process, mental health counselors, school psychologists, and other professionals were on hand to ensure that any students and participating families experiencing emotional difficulties due to the realism of



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the program were monitored and supported. After the simulated memorial service for the victims, all parents and students playing a role were de-briefed and praised the school staff for creating a nurturing atmosphere for the emotions that erupted over the two day presentation. Many students, visibly moved by the simulated events, said that it "reinforced my resolve not to drink and drive," while another said after seeing the carnage and sorrow brought about by reckless actions, "I would not get in the car of someone who's been drinking."



All of the students who participated in this exercise have signed up to participate in the SADD (Students Against Drunk Driving) program and would like to become Ambassadors of the program. Activities, such as a 'no drinking, no driving, no getting into cars with people who have been drinking' pledge will take place during the lunch period the week before prom. Students will also wear their Every 15 Minutes t-shirts the week before prom to remind students of what they saw during this program.

The District is to be congratulated for bringing a thought-provoking national program and meaningful experience that may one day prevent a real tragedy from ever happening to one of its students.

