

Hands on Heads up

TEENS TACKLE INEXPERIENCE AND DISTRACTION

By Jennifer Johnson
Photos by Sam VarnHagen

Inexperience and distraction are the leading causes of auto accidents for teen drivers. To help combat these driving challenges, more than 1,200 teens and parents

received hands-on teen driver training in Phoenix and Mesa last November for free courtesy of Ford's Driving Skills for Life program, which has trained thousands of teens and parents in Arizona for the past decade.

According to data from the Arizona Governor's Office of Highway Safety, 69 drivers between ages 15 and 24 were killed in car crashes in 2014, with an additional 7,733 drivers between 15-24 injured in auto accidents. A recent report by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration shows that fatalities for teen drivers ages 16-17 are on the rise nationwide, and vehicle crashes remain the leading cause of death for teenagers.

The Ford Driving Skills for Life (DSFL) program, developed by the Ford Motor Company Fund and Governors Highway Safety Assoc-

iation in 2003, addresses the main causes of car crashes involving teenagers—inexperience and distraction. The program, designed by a panel of safety experts, focuses on building the skills of young drivers in several key areas: hazard recognition, vehicle handling, space management and speed management.

One part of the hands-on course involved teens learning firsthand the dangerous effects of distractions in the car, like texting while driving or carrying too many passengers. Teens are challenged to drive a coned course at a normal speed without distractions and then repeat the exercise while texting and being distracted by passengers. The cones are a visual representation of how their driving is impacted—typically there are numerous cones knocked over. Teens also

learned how to steer a car safely out of a slide in specially equipped Mustangs, and how to change lanes quickly and safely using traffic lights.

Andrea Strock is a physics teacher at Perry High School in the Chandler Unified School District and has been involved with the DSFL program for several years now. Each year, 100 of her students attend one of the sessions as part of a field trip.

"As physics teachers, we can teach about the physics of driving and how important it is for our students to be safe behind the wheel, but one of the best ways for students to understand the real-life consequences of bad driving is to actually experience those things firsthand," Strock said. "This program creates horrible scenarios, such as drunk driving, texting while driving and spinning out of control—the scenarios we do not want to see any of our kids get into. Ford brings in professional drivers and police officers to discuss the real-life consequences, and they give our students the chance to explore making these poor driving decisions and see what happens, how to control situations and why you should never get yourself into these situations to begin with."

Randy Bleicher, lead instructor for Driving Skills for Life, added, "The exercises put students in real-world driving scenarios in a controlled environment so they are equipped with knowledge that could save their life down the road. One of the main concepts we want kids to get out of

More than 600 teens and parents participated in the Ford Driving Skills for Life hands-on driver training clinic at the Mesa Police and Fire Training Facility on November 7 and 8. Students learned advanced skills in key areas of inexperience: vehicle handling, hazard recognition, speed and space management. The Mesa Police Department also talked to the teens about the dangers of distracted and impaired driving. Ford Driving Skills for Life began in 2003 and provides free hands-on training across the United States in order to address the leading cause of death for teenagers—vehicle crashes.

this program is decision-making skills. If you make the right decisions while driving, there is no longer a need to worry."

Research conducted for the Ford DSFL program also shows that teens tend to follow in their parents' footsteps when it comes to driving habits. Parents can help address the problem simply by setting a good example behind the wheel. These good habits include everything from buckling up and not speeding, to teaching their children how to scan for potential hazards while driving.

Ford DSFL is the most comprehensive teen safe driving program in the US and has trained more than 39,000 teens and parents here—and close to 25,000 in 29 countries globally this year alone—with hands-on professional driver instruction. For online curriculum or to sign up for the information list and to be the first notified of future sessions in Arizona, visit www.DrivingSkillsforLife.com. ■



Ford's Driving Skills for Life program provides hands-on training to teens in an effort to combat inexperience and distraction.

