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At Medway High: Crash and learn?

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Medway High School students watch as Joanna Ference is wheeled to an ambulance during yesterday's mock crash to warn students about the danger of drinking and driving during prom season.



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By Julie Balise, Daily News staff

Milford Daily News

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MEDWAY — Connor Flanagan looked disoriented when he stepped away from his Pontiac, leaving friend Cara Callahan in the passenger seat.

The car was on its side, the windshield blown out and front bumper lying on the ground several feet away. Another car wedged against Flanagan's was similarly damaged. Passengers from both vehicles had blood on their faces and clothes. Callahan laid on her side, motionless.

Moments later, a car full of their friends arrived at the scene.

"Connor? Cara? What happened?" they asked. "Someone help!"

Sirens from three police cruisers soon rang out and were followed by fire trucks and an ambulance. They circled and parked at the scene, which was staged at the Medway High School parking lot to look like a drunk-driving accident.

High school juniors and seniors watched as two of the accident victims were wheeled away on stretchers and put in an ambulance. Callahan, who pretended to die at the scene, was removed by a hearse. After failing multiple sobriety tests, Flanagan was handcuffed and taken away by police.

Flanagan, Callahan and the other actors are members of the school's Students Against Destructive Decisions group, which holds the mock car crash every two years. Yesterday's event was held as part of preparations for the school prom, which is on Friday.

"The point is to get the message across that drunk-driving can cause death, even to the innocent," SADD adviser Sharon Guilfoil said.

High school senior Emma Gay and junior Stephanie Simmons said they would not participate in the type of behavior that led to yesterday's mock crash. Still, they were surprised when they realized they knew the victims.

"I think it caught me off guard more than I thought it would," Gay said.

SADD is hosting an assembly this morning at which School Resource Officer Donald Grimes will read a fictional report detailing a drunk driving accident that killed two girls. A student acting as the driver will be held with no bail. Girls acting as the victims will read letters to him, asking what it feels like to be responsible for their deaths. Those who would not participate in the type of behavior that led to yesterday's mock crash. Still, they were surprised when they realized they knew the victims.

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Ann-Marie Handy, whose son, Alex, died in a bicycle accident with a van in 2006, will speak at today's event, Guilfoil said.

Sophomores Ali Hart and Aly Pisarczyk, members of SADD, said they hope students understand yesterday's scene could really happen if they drink and drive.

"Prom's this weekend and I think this will really hit home with kids," Pisarczyk said.

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#1 for Neurosurgery

Talk Ann-Marie Handy gave at the Mock Memorial Service 5/19/11

Hi, my name is Ann Handy. When I was thinking about what to say to all of you today, I was at a loss for words. I thought, what can I say that might have an impact on your decision making or how you control yourselves? Will you take what I say to heart and really listen?

I know many of you knew Alex, some of you liked him and some of you didn't but either way Alex should be sitting alongside all of you listening to someone else give their advice on how to be safe. He should be here with his dad, brother and I to witness all of the moments in life that define us.

I have decided to read you a letter that I have written to Alex. This is something I do from time to time, like journaling to check in on him and to let him know, we would give anything if we could have just one more moment with him.

Dear Alex,

It has been almost five years since you have left and not a day goes by that I don't think about you and the tragic way your life was cut short. You were taken away from all the people that love you, much too early in life.

I can be driving along and I see a group of kids in the plaza, and I still look for you, wondering if I will see you pop your head out of the crowd? I think about that wonderful smile, your beautiful blue eyes and how much you loved to argue with me. I think about how I wish we could have one more argument.

Do you know how many people told me in the beginning how "life goes on" and that time would heal our wounds? I couldn't believe what they were saying to me. Only someone who has NOT lost a child would say that kind of cliché to someone who has. Do they know how their words cut into me? It has not been easy to have you ripped from our life so suddenly. Everything your dad and I planned for our life together was turned upside down. It was now about your death and our survival.

Oh God, I thought, we have to tell Christopher. The hardest moment we have ever had to face was taking Christopher into that hospital room, and explaining to a 5 year old that he no longer has a big brother and that his hero is gone. Christopher is now 10 years old and still asks about you almost every day. He wants to know what you were like. Sometimes he cries about how you left too soon! He misses you joking with him and playing with him. Sometimes he will smile and I can see YOU in him.

Fast forward, it's been 5 years. I look back and wonder how we got to this place of living without you. Sometimes it feels like yesterday, and other days it feels so far away. I still worry about forgetting you. I really want you to know that I miss the sound of the basketball bouncing in the driveway! Remember how I use to tease you that you would have to take your mom on a date, when I was old, and you use to tell me, that I was old, and that I better be nice to you now or you'd put me in a nursing home? I really thought we would have more time together. I wonder how life can go on when there is such a big hole left in my heart?

Okay I hate to admit this, but I guess all those people were right. Life really does go on, whether I want it to or not. I do walk a little differently now. I know that you will love to hear that I listen more and talk less. I bet you never thought that would happen!

Someone asked me the other day if we were happy? Before responding, I thought, are we allowed to be happy after the pain and suffering of losing you... Okay, don't be upset but, I replied, yes, we are happy, it's not like before. It's different now. Our life has a "before Alex died theme", and an "After Alex died theme". Sometimes the grief returns like a freight train, it rushes in and takes my breath away, but yes, we are happy.

Did you know we started a foundation in your honor? I know you would like this because you always liked to be the center of attention. Our focus is to spread the word of safety and education in our community. I think that if we can help one young person think first, and make the right decision that we have accomplished our goal. Yes, there are constant reminders of you in our community, I still see kids riding bikes and skateboards, most of them without helmets and I still hear about young people being involved in tragic car accidents, where their carelessness or drug and alcohol has played a role. I wish that I could make them see into the future regarding their actions BEFORE these tragedies have occurred. That all of our actions and decision-making doesn't only affect ourselves, but it affects our family, friends, and the entire community where we live. I want to spare their families the pain and suffering we have felt.

Alex, I know we could only protect you so much as you were growing up, and ultimately the choices you made had an impact on your short life. I do promise you however, we will continue on our journey spreading our message to "Think first".

I love and miss you always, Mom

So I guess that last thought, I would like to leave you with today is this, realizing your dreams and goals is a journey filled with many obstacles, and it can be very challenging, sometimes... you think you can't go on. The road can throw you some pretty-big curveballs, but it is up to you to make the right choices. Remember that the adults in your life want to protect you from making the kind of mistake that our son Alex made. They want you to have fun in a responsible way. Look at what is happening not only in the moment, but ask yourself, is the choice I am making right now going to have a negative impact, two or three steps down the road?

My hope is that I have made some sort of impression, but just in case I have not I will leave you with these final words...

Yesturday's Mock Accident was not real but Alex's accident was.