

# **'It makes a difference if it saves one kid'**

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It's been almost a year since two teens and a 20-year-old died in separate vehicle accidents police blamed on underage drinking.

Aug. 13, 2006 was a day of uncommon sadness for greater Lexington.

On the first anniversary of their deaths, Lexington 1 school administrators will start hammering out details of a program they hope will curtail such behavior and sharpen driving skills.

The district wants to require students to take a defensive driving course in order to qualify for the privilege to park on campus.

"I would like to make it mandatory," said Anne Elam, director of Lexington 1 high schools, which have a combined enrollment of 5,700 students.

The school system could be S.C.'s first to embrace "Alive at 25," a nationally recognized course aimed at improving novice motorists' driving skills.

"The board and everybody in the district office has been extremely positive," said Brooke Russell, S.C. director of the National Safety Council, which delivers the instruction. "They should be commended for being out front on this."

Earlier this year, Dutch Fork High School in neighboring Lexington-Richland 5 embraced Alive at 25 and announced students must take the course to receive a parking permit. Russell said 650 Dutch Fork High teens did so.

The initiative was not lost on Lexington 1 administrators, who began exploring how to bring the program to Gilbert, Lexington, Pelion and White Knoll high schools. They had an ally in Lexington 1 trustee Grady Harmon, an executive committee member of S.C.'s chapter of the National Safety Council.

"I just think it is one of the greatest things out there," Harmon said. "It makes a difference if it saves one kid."

A Baptist minister, Harmon has officiated at funerals of young people killed in vehicle accidents. He said each left him with a heavy heart.

The infrastructure to begin offering the course already is in place. Six Lexington County sheriff's deputies are certified to teach the course after completing 40 hours of instruction. Classes generally are taught after school or on Saturdays.

A seventh Lexington County deputy will join the staff of the local National Safety Council shortly and travel the state as a roving advocate for the Alive at 25 program. Russell said the uniformed officer, who will be paid by the council, will send a strong message that law enforcement believes the course can be an effective tool reaching teen drivers.

Russell announced at Lexington 1's July school board meeting that her organization will award 400 scholarships this year to allow teens to take the course without paying a \$35 fee.

"I'm proud to hear money will not stand in the way," board chairman Bert Dooley said.

Lexington 1 charges \$25 for a student parking permit.

Maj. John Allard, the Lexington County Sheriff's Department's chief spokesman, said James R. Metts supports Alive at 25.

"He's very concerned about underage drinking, irresponsible behavior and poor driving skills," Allard said. "This program addresses those concerns."

Wray Automotive in Columbia donated a vehicle for the Lexington deputy to use and underwrote the instructors' training, Russell said.

Lexington 1's four principals will be part of the Aug. 13 planning meeting, where discussion will focus on how to implement a district-wide policy.

Lexington 1 schools reopen Aug. 22 and Elam acknowledged implementing a mandatory parking permit-defensive driving policy this year will be impossible. She said she's hopeful the policy will be phased in this year and will be mandatory for the 2008-09 school year.

Jo Mayer, White Knoll High's principal, said, "What's important and in the forefront for all of us is the safety of our students. We want them to be thoughtful, careful drivers."

Pelion High's Jean Haggard said, "We're doing it because we're concerned about the kids.

"It's our responsibility to try and educate them to think about what they do ... behind that wheel."

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