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Mother urges students to make smart choices behind the wheel

Bob Kalinowski – Citizens Voice

With images of a mangled car projected onto a large screen in the auditorium, Eileen Miller asked hundreds of teenagers Tuesday if they'd drive a car blindfolded. While the obvious answer is no, she reminded them that's essentially what people do when they text and drive.

The Scranton woman has become a crusader against distracted driving since her only son, Paul, was killed in a July 2010 crash in Monroe County. The wreck was caused by a trucker who swerved into his lane of traffic while reaching for a phone.

On Tuesday, she brought her message to Greater Nanticoke Area High School, urging students to make smart choices behind the wheel and call out those who drive while distracted.

"It only takes one second," Miller said. "One second it took for that semi-truck driver to kill my son."

Miller showed the students various photos of the crash scene and told them how her son's body was unrecognizable after being drug down the roadway with the wreckage.

The truck driver pleaded guilty to involuntary manslaughter and later was sentenced to 12 to 36 months in state prison.

Paul Miller was driving northbound on Route 33 near Salyorsburg when the truck veered off the road while traveling southbound, crossed the grassy median and slammed into his car. The trucker was driving 69 mph in a 45 mph work zone.

Paul Miller always dreamed of a career in law enforcement. He had his associate degree in criminal justice from Lackawanna College and was attending East Stroudsburg University at the time of his death.

Sadly, he never got to fulfill his dreams, his mother said.

Eileen Miller travels the country sharing her family's story

"I don't get one cent for this. I'm a brokenhearted mom. I'm here because I don't want this to happen to any of you," Eileen Miller said.

Bereaved mom's emotional presentation warns Nanticoke students about distracted driving

By Bill O'Boyle - boboye@timesleader.com

NANTICOKE — The mother of Paul Miller Jr. Tuesday told several hundred Greater Nanticoke Area students that her son did everything right on July 5, 2010.

But the driver of the tractor-trailer traveling in the opposite direction did everything wrong.

Miller told the 9th through 12th grade students that she and her family know all too well the dangers distracted driving can cause.

Miller's son, Paul, was driving his vehicle on Route 33 in Hamilton Township, when a southbound tractor-trailer crossed the center grass divider and traveled head-on into his car. At the time of the crash, the tractor trailer was being operated by a distracted driver. Paul died from the injuries he suffered as a result of the crash — he was 21.

“On July 5, 2010, in one second, our lives were tragically changed forever because of something so preventable,” Miller said. “Our handsome beautiful son Paul Miller Jr. lost his life to a distracted driver. Life is full of choices — what will your choice be?”

If Miller's emotional presentation weren't enough to convince the students — who are preparing for their May 3 prom — to not text and drive, the graphic pictures she showed had to have an impact.

Miller showed pictures of the accident scene, her son's crumpled car and she told the students that when she went to the morgue to identify her son's body, she couldn't.

Miller said the driver of the truck was charged and sentenced to three years in prison, serving 17 months.

Miller has spoken to hundreds of schools and she asks them to take a pledge to not text and drive. She uses an acronym — P.A.S.S. — that stands for no **P**hone, no **A**lcohol or addictive drugs, no **S**peeding and use **S**eatbelts.

“These tragedies are preventable,” Miller said. “They are crashes, not accidents.”

Miller volunteers her time advocating for her cause. She has lobbied for legislation in Harrisburg and urges others to contact their state representatives to support House Bill 37 — which would prohibit drivers from having their phones in their hands while driving their vehicle. Drivers must use Bluetooth technology or a docking station in order use their phones.

“I'm just a mom with a broken heart,” Miller said. “I don't want anyone else to ever be in my situation. I want everyone to use their voices and their heads.”

Are you ‘intexticated?’

Tuesday’s program was sponsored by AAA Mid-Atlantic, which recently launched an initiative to reduce deadly distracted driving, citing a poll that showed 90 percent of Pennsylvania drivers believe distracted driving is as dangerous as drunk driving.

Amid National Distracted Driving Awareness Month, AAA Mid-Atlantic is launching its “Don’t Drive Intoxicated — Don’t Drive Intexticated” campaign that links the impact of drinking and driving with distracted driving. Both are comparably dangerous and deadly, research shows, killing and injuring drivers, passengers, pedestrians and cyclists. What is more, a person using a cellphone while driving is four times as likely to be involved in a crash as drivers who are not.

“AAA’s ‘Don’t Drive Intoxicated—Don’t Drive Intexticated’ campaign targets drivers who would never consider getting behind the wheel after drinking an alcoholic beverage and, yet, will use a mobile device while driving, dangerously taking their eyes and minds off the road,” explained Cathy Rossi, Vice President of Public and Government Affairs for AAA Mid-Atlantic. “We hope more drivers make an effort to minimize their distractions to create safer driving conditions for everyone on the road.”

According to NHTSA, “nearly 80 percent of crashes and 65 percent of near-crashes involved some form of driver inattention within three seconds before the crash event.” Combating distracted driving through greater enforcement and education will protect all motorists.

In Pennsylvania

- According to PennDOT crash statistics, a distracted driver was the contributing cause of more than 15,600 crashes in Pennsylvania in 2017 — 6,500 MORE than a drunk driver.
- Between 2014 and 2018, the State of Pennsylvania saw a 118 percent increase in the number of distracted driving citations issued.
- Between 2014 and 2018, the Wilkes-Barre region saw a triple-digit increase in the number of distracted driving citations issued — Luzerne County was up 165 percent.
- A recent AAA poll of Pennsylvania drivers (March 2019) indicates that 90 percent of them agree that the dangers posed by drivers distracted by their electronic devices are equal to the dangers posed by drivers who are drunk.

For more information and tips for how motorists can avoid distracted driving, visit www.AAA.com/DontDriveDistracted.