

Front Royal Lodge 2382 in Northern Virginia Daily Article

High school students try out driving simulators



Rich Cooley/Daily: Brooke Post, 16, a Warren County High School student, looks out the window of the Warren County Sheriff's Office's 2004 Monte Carlo SS with her simulator goggles on Wednesday. The department converted a former investigator's vehicle and outfitted it with a donated trick paint job to use as a Distracted Driving Simulator. For the source of this article, go to <http://www.nvdaily.com/news/2011/11/high-school-students-try-out-driving-simulators.php>

By Joe Beck -- jbeck@nvdaily.com

FRONT ROYAL -- Crunching metal, screeching tires and tinkling glass formed a soundtrack of vehicular mayhem as the Sheriff's Office demonstrated a new distracted driving simulator in a fire station parking lot Wednesday.

The simulator appeared to be having the desired effect on its intended audience -- 17 teenagers from Warren County and Skyline high schools and Randolph-Macon Academy.

They watched with a mixture of amusement and feigned horror as a giant flat screen TV filled with a view through a digital windshield.

The students groaned, gasped and chuckled as the vehicle crept back and forth across the centerline. Sometimes it smacked vehicles from behind or nearly mowed down some avatar pedestrians who ventured into the wrong place at the wrong time.

The erratic movements on the screen reflected the driving decisions, actions and reflexes of Brooke Post, 16, who was seated inside a parked car a few feet away.

The vehicle, a 2004 Chevrolet Monte Carlo sporting an exuberant custom paint job, was hooked up to the flat screen through electronic sensors.

Post wore virtual reality goggles that allowed her to see the world through the same computer-generated images projected on the TV screen a few feet away.

The distractions included a sheriff's deputy calling Post on the cell phone next to her in the vehicle.

"Oh my God, where is she going?" one girl exclaimed as she watched the hood of the vehicle careening back and forth across the screen.

"It was fun," Post said after she had finished. "It was pretty much what I expected." Courtney Kidd, 16, said the simulator is a response to a real problem she has noticed. "Distracted driving is a big thing in Front Royal," she said. "I always see people on their cell phone."

The students were the debut audience for the distracted driving initiative. Sheriff Danny McEathron said he hopes the Monte Carlo with its eye-catching exterior will be a familiar sight at high schools and community events within a few months.

The goal is make students aware of the risk of distracted driving, a problem that has grown with the spread of text messaging on cell phones and other electronic gadgets. "I wanted something that puts them in the car, that puts their hands on the steering wheel," McEathron said.

He said he also wanted a vehicle that wouldn't look too "policey."

"I wanted something that would draw the kids because an old [Ford] Crown Victoria won't do it," McEathron said.

McEathron enlisted Chris Layne, who runs an auto paint shop in Strasburg, to transform the aging Monte Carlo from the sheriff's fleet into an auto show-ready dream car.

Layne worked on the project for two weeks, three days of which were spent on spray paint alone.

"The younger generation, they see a car like this, they want to get behind the wheel," Layne said.

The cost of the \$4,000 paint job was divided evenly between Jack Evans Chevrolet and Elks Lodge 2382.

The electronic simulator software cost \$21,000, \$10,000 of which came from the Sheriff's Office budget and the rest from drug seizure money, McEathron said.

McEathron said he began thinking about instituting a distracted driver program about 1 1/2 years ago.

The idea picked up momentum during a Google search that led him to the simulator software and equipment now installed in the Monte Carlo.

"We really think it's going to be a good program for kids to see what it's like behind the wheel," said Sgt. Sam Carr, who supervises the agency's school resource officers.

The software also can be switched into a driving under the influence mode that shows the effect on a driver's ability after consuming a hypothetical amount of alcohol by age, sex and body type.