

“This is a huge eye-opener’: After Gretna crash, how can another tragedy be prevented?

Written by Erin Duffy

Chances are, lots of families are having tough conversations about underage drinking and driving after Sarpy County authorities revealed this week that the crash in Gretna that killed four teen girls and injured another last month involved both alcohol and speeding.

An investigation found that the 16-year-old driver of the car had a blood alcohol content of .09. The car hit speeds of more than 90 mph on Platteview Road near 180th Street before plunging into a creek and catching fire the night of June 17.

The crash killed Abigail Barth, the 16-year-old driver; 16-year-olds Kloe Odermatt and Addisyn Pfeifer; and 15-year-old Alex Minardi. Roan Brandon, 15, survived.

“Maybe this is a wake-up call for some parents to maybe have that conversation with their child,” said Anna Venditte, an instructor at the Cornhusker Driving School. “I hate to say something like this is a huge eye-opener.”

The five victims of the crash were, from left, Alex Minardi, Addisyn Pfeifer, Kloe Odermatt, Roan Brandon and Abigail Barth. Brandon was the only survivor and has been released from the hospital.

So after the latest tragedy involving teens and alcohol, how do you hammer home the risks to teens and to parents and adults who might be persuaded to buy alcohol for minors or turn a blind eye to drinking?

Safety officials and groups working to combat underage drinking said there is no single solution to a complex problem. But public education campaigns and open, honest conversations between families and peers can make a difference, similar to the ways that organizers tackled other public health issues, like discouraging smoking or promoting seat belt usage.

“(People say) ‘well, kids will be kids,’” said Mark Segerstrom, the administrator of the Nebraska Department of Transportation Highway Safety Office. “Well sure, kids will always be kids ... but don’t you want to take any available, potential time you can to talk about safety?”

Data from the Highway Safety Office shows that alcohol-related collisions in Nebraska, among all ages, have generally decreased the past few years; there were 1,661 such crashes in 2017, compared with 1,908 in 2008. Segerstrom credits that to a variety of factors, including campaigns by groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving, enforcement of DUI laws and the rise of ride-sharing apps like Uber and Lyft that make it easy for adults to request a ride after a night of drinking. (Uber and Lyft drivers are not supposed to pick up unaccompanied passengers under age 18.)

The number of drivers ages 15 to 19 involved in alcohol-related crashes is also dropping in Nebraska. But over the past decade, depending on the year, alcohol has been involved in anywhere from 11% to 33% of fatal crashes with teen drivers at the wheel. Bad weather, speed, texting, inexperience and other drivers behaving badly can also factor into crashes. Unintended injuries, which include traffic collisions, remain the No. 1 cause of death for teenagers nationwide, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Statistics bear out the importance of the “buckle up” message. In 2016, 12 teen drivers were killed in car crashes in Nebraska. None used a seat belt, Segerstrom said.

Authorities have not said whether any of the girls in the Gretna crash were wearing seat belts, although at least two were ejected from the vehicle, including the sole survivor.

Chris Wagner, the executive director of Project Extra Mile, a group that works to prevent underage drinking and overuse of alcohol, said lecturing teens not to drink and drive isn't enough. Too often, adults are selling or providing alcohol to minors. In April, a 30-year-old Kwik Shop clerk was convicted of providing alcohol to a 17-year-old Elkhorn High student who drove drunk and died.

Sarpy County officials are still investigating how the Gretna teens procured the alcohol they drank the night of the crash and have asked anyone with information to step forward. Only one of the five girls did not have alcohol in her system, according to the Sarpy County Sheriff's Office.

“Adults simply following the law may have prevented these deaths,” Wagner said in an email. “(In terms of what works, having good policies and good enforcement in place makes a world of difference. The approach of scaring kids into not drinking has been shown to be an ineffective long-term strategy.”

In states like Illinois, one study found that higher taxes on alcohol resulted in a 26% decrease in fatal crashes involving alcohol, Wagner said, but alcohol tax hikes have not proved popular in the Nebraska Legislature. Another study concluded that the effect on vehicle fatalities is mixed.

Project Extra Mile also works with law enforcement agencies to conduct regular compliance checks of retailers to ensure that they're not selling to minors.

Venditte teaches driver's ed, which touches on the importance of seat belts and the dangers of drunken driving. Police officers, doctors and other experts visit classes to share their experiences, and kids watch what happens to a dummy not wearing a seat belt in a rollover accident.

She also encourages parents and teens to talk about what to do if they or a friend have been drinking and need a ride.

“If you made a bad decision, don't be scared to call Mom and say, ‘Can you come pick me up,’” Venditte said. “Yes, you shouldn't be drinking, but parents should be proud (you're) asking for help.”

On social media, several parents said they've had similar discussions and have offered to fund an emergency Uber or cab account.

“I talked with my 16 year old daughter about how even one drink could put her little body over the legal limit,” one mother tweeted. “Just one drink is one too many! Her and her 4 friends have discussed this devastating situation many times! It hit very close to home!”

Scared-straight lectures or mock crashes at high schools may be less effective deterrents than having parents and friends model good driving skills and smart decision-making, Segerstrom said. More than 30 Nebraska middle and high schools have adopted a peer-to-peer program called Teens in the Driver Seat that trains students to talk to classmates about safe driving, seat belts and texting.

During prom season, students and parents across the metro area organize elaborate post-prom events to provide a safe alternative to drinking-fueled parties. In years past, members of the Gretna community worked to persuade high schoolers to ditch the traditional “senior party” — an unsupervised drinking bash often held on the last day of school.

Segerstrom advised that parents familiarize themselves with the different regulations surrounding learner’s permits and provisional operator’s permits, which run until a driver’s 18th birthday. That includes restrictions on how late teens can drive and, for the first six months, how many friends they can pile into a car.

Driving records show that Barth, the 16-year-old Gretna driver, had her provisional permit for more than six months, so she was legally allowed to drive with four friends in the car. Still, a car full of teenage passengers increases the risk of a crash.

Parental involvement shouldn’t end the day you hand over the keys. “You still need to constantly talk to your children, go on a drive with your kids, let your kids drive,” Segerstrom said.

And if you’re an adult driving with kids or teens in the car, follow the rules of the road. Don’t grab your phone to quickly glance at a text, always use your seat belt and don’t get behind the wheel after a few beers.

“If you have several drinks, you’re having a fun night, and your kids watch you stumble and get back in the car, what example is that telling me?” Segerstrom said.