

ALL PHOTOS: JEFF ARNETT



“Studies show that five seconds is the average time your eyes are off the road while texting. At 55 mph, that is enough time to cover the length of a football field.”

Rucha Shah (center) is joined by Barrington High School Driver Education instructors Marty Dello and Michael Gasso.

## Distracted Driving

TRY TO REMEMBER THE LAST text message you received. Would reading or responding to that message behind the wheel of a moving vehicle be worth getting into a car accident? Chances are that it could wait.

In today’s society, staying connected is no longer an option; it is a way of life. One of the fastest-growing ways of communicating is the use of cell phones, particularly texting. We do not even realize how attached to our cell phones we have become. Research tells us about 10 percent of drivers can be found at any time of day using a hand-held or hands-free phone.

Studies by the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute (VTTI) show that five seconds is the average time your eyes are off the road while texting. While traveling at 55 mph, that is enough time to cover the length of a football field (2009, VTTI). Research also proves a texting driver is 23 times more likely to get into an accident than a non-texting driver.

As much as cell phones are responsible for distracted driving, other devices are equally dangerous. The definition of distracted driving, according to the California Department of Motor Vehicles, is when events or things prevent you from operating your car safely. There are three different categories of distracted driving: visual, or taking your eyes off the road; cognitive, or taking your mind off the road; and manual, or taking your hands off the steering wheel.

Driver distractions are the leading cause of most vehicle crashes and near-crashes. According to a study released by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and VTTI, 80 percent of crashes and 65 percent of near-crashes involve some form of driver distraction in which a diversion occurred within three seconds before the accident. According to the NHTSA and VTTI study, the principal actions that cause distracted driving and lead to vehicle crashes are cell phone use, reaching for a moving object inside the ve-

hicle, looking at an object or event outside of the vehicle, and reading and applying makeup.

The other day when I was coming home from school, I saw an adult woman in a mini-van reading a newspaper while driving. The woman had the paper placed in front of the steering wheel as she steered. This incident demonstrated all three types of distracted driving. In this multi-tasking society, it is common to do more than one thing at the same time; but when driving, your mind and body should be working simultaneously to drive the vehicle. Adding one more object divides your attention and increases the risk of an accident while driving. You should never be reading or grooming while driving.

Most accidents in the early-morning-rush time occur because people are running late and have not been able to get enough time to finish all their jobs. As a result, people are grooming themselves or trying to finish uncompleted tasks in the car, like brushing their teeth, eating breakfast



or even changing their clothes. In the process, they often encounter an unexpected situation and are not able to react quickly or handle it smoothly. Had they dedicated their car ride to attentively focusing on the road, there would be fewer chances to get into an accident. By talking to someone else, you are focusing your attentiveness and auditory ability on the conversation instead of the road. Another tip is to turn on the radio or music at a moderate volume before you start the car. This eliminates the risk of drifting into another lane and will help you avoid causing a collision.

Distracted driving is a serious issue that jeopardizes the safety of everyone, whether they are on or off the roads. The U.S. Department of Transportation is trying to prevent distracted driving by conveying the simple message, "Put it down!" Last November, Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White created a Safe Driver Advisory Council and a resolution to improve highway safety in Illinois.

Although the sustained attention span of an average person while driving is about 30 seconds, the power of determination can surpass that limitation. If we truly believe in the importance of keeping our roads and families safe, we must initiate a ripple effect. Parents and students: begin with you, your family and community to accept the challenge of safe driving. Give up any distractions while behind the wheel. Make today the first day of keeping yourself and other drivers unharmed and our roadways accident-free. U

*Rucha Shah is a junior at Barrington High School. Shah has participated in a school-wide campaign with her Driver Education instructors, Marty Dello and Michael Gasso, to promote Teens Against Distracted Driving and Operation Click. Both programs are designed to reduce teen motor vehicle fatalities and injuries.*



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