

## **TEENAGE DRIVING SAFETY**

### **MOTHERS WHO LOST THEIR TEENS TO CAR ACCIDENTS SPEAK OUT**

**ERNIE BERTOTHY:** Welcome to the DMV Infocast, an audio production of the State of Connecticut Department of Motor Vehicles. This is Ernie Bertothy, Infocast Editor.

With us today are the leaders of !IMPACT, which stands for Mourning Parents Act, Connie Jascowski, Sherri Chapman and Janice Palmer join us today for a serious discussion about teenage driving safety.

**ERNIE BERTOTHY:** Well, Connie, Janice, Sherri, thank you very much for joining us today. The first question on everybody's mind is what exactly is !IMPACT. I'm going to open it up to the floor and let someone describe what it is that your group does.

**CONNIE JASCOWSKI:** !IMPACT was developed after the accidents of all three of our sons. They were three separate accidents within December of 2002, within an 11-day period of each other, and within a 25-mile radius of each other. We decided that that was not going to be acceptable to us. This was happening way too often. So we developed the group, !IMPACT. And the !IMPACT stands for Mourning, M-O-U-R-I-N-G, Mourning Parents Act.

**ERNIE BERTOTHY:** And what is your mission as a group?

**SHERRI CHAPMAN:** Well, as Connie mentioned, !IMPACT is a non-profit organization whose mission is to eliminate tragedies caused by inexperienced drivers through awareness, education and legislation. We were formed in January of 2004, and since then we have presented teen driver safety

programs throughout the State of Connecticut, primarily at high schools but also with parent and law enforcement groups and school administrators.

**ERNIE BERTOTHY:** And it's obviously a very noble cause. And I'm just -- out of curiosity, how did you all come to meet each other and actually get this group off the ground? Can you talk a little bit more about the circumstances behind that?

**CONNIE JASCOWSKI:** Jan, you and I met in actually November, either October or November of 2003. That was at a grief program getting through the holidays. Jan and I spoke briefly. I was telling her what I was doing, and because I started this -- the focus of this like two months after Joey's accident. I was sitting in Senator Seattle's (phonetic) office as he was trying to get the graduated driver's licensing bill passed. He was a personal friend. He's a family friend. He knew Joey very well. And he, of course, was devastated by this whole thing. And I sat there in his office two months afterwards and decided that, you know, something needed to be done.

So I started working with Joey's school for the one year anniversary week of Joey's death, which was December 17, 2002. And I'm not quite sure how this happened, but the *Hartford Courant* contacted myself and my husband and did quite an extensive article. It was in the paper the day before my presentation, which was on the one year anniversary of Joey's death.

**JANICE PALMER:** And that's when I read her article and I decided to go see her because I also had a desire to make something good come out of the bad tragedy that I experienced. So I went to see her presentation in front of the senior class?

**CONNIE JASCOWSKI:** It was the junior and seniors.

**JANICE PALMER:** Junior and seniors. Okay. And that's when I knew that I wanted to take it further. Connie gave me her number, and I called her.

**ERNIE BERTOTHY:** So Janice, you read about it in the paper, and Sherri, how did you get with the group?

**SHERRI CHAPMAN:** Well, actually, Janice and I knew each other, or got to meet each other very shortly after our sons' car crashes. We both attended Compassionate Friends meetings. So that was about a month after, about a month or two after our sons were killed.

I had also read the article in the paper, and like Janice, felt that, you know, I needed to do something, and who better than a group of bereaved parents? I'd been struck by the fact that our accidents were so close in time. The ages of our sons were very similar. And so I also attended. And that's when we struck up a bond and decided that we were going to move forward with this.

**ERNIE BERTOTHY:** And in fact, you have moved forward. You have a website, and you've also developed a teen driver safety presentation in which each of you really volunteers your time at schools, driving schools, fairs, other places to present information to teenagers. Can you talk a little bit about what you present at these places, Janice?

**JANICE PALMER:** Well, we first start out, Connie introduces our group to the teenagers. We warn them how delicate the situation might be and if anybody needs a counselor, there's always one available. From there, each mother gets up and speaks. I'm the first speaker, and I speak about my son, Dan Palmer's accident, in which he and three other people died. It was an accident on December 6, 2002, and in his situation, it was his brand new car and he decided to take it for a ride. But, unfortunately, he made a decision to

drink with his buddies prior to getting into his car, and being a new driver, he was only eight months licensed, plus being impaired by alcohol, he was not able to keep his car in control, and he crossed the center line, and Mr. Sullivan's car, with three adults, hit them broadside.

Three people in my son's car all perished after their cars collided and burst into flames, and one passenger in Mr. Sullivan's car died. Actually, Mr. Sullivan died. And the other two occupants were Life Star'd to the hospital, and they're both surviving.

And so I share that with the kids. We put up posters in front of the audience. We show them that there's a face to this tragedy, and it's a face that's similar to their own. And then I introduce Sherri, who has her own story.

**ERNIE BERTOTHY:** Sherri.

**SHERRI CHAPMAN:** Well, we do each share our stories in painful detail. It's emotional, very emotional for both the presenters and the audience, but we capture the kid's attention and we're certain that we make a difference based on the feedback we've received.

Just to tell you a little bit about the circumstances surrounding my son Ryan's death, he was killed December 7, 2002, when the car in which he was riding as a passenger crashed in Hebron, Connecticut. And that was just six hours after the Glastonbury accident that Janice just described.

The driver was speeding through a curve, which he couldn't safely maneuver, and he ended up hitting several parked cars and it was passenger's side impact. There were three kids in the car, including the driver. And no one else was seriously injured.

It wasn't until six or seven months later that the 18-year-old driver was arrested on numerous charges, including manslaughter. And nearly a year

and a half later that he was sentenced to eight years in prison, suspended after five.

And then my talk is followed by Connie's. We do this in the sequence of our accidents.

**CONNIE JASCOWSKI:** Well, just 11 days after Dan's accident and 10 days after Ryan's accident, my son Joey was on his way home from school, just 20 minutes out of school, no alcohol, no drugs, nothing. He was speeding. He was doing 56 in a 35. He came up over a hill, and there was a woman walking a dog in the road. So he swerved to avoid hitting her, just like any driver would do, but with his inexperience, he had only been licensed about six weeks, and with his inexperience, he tried to correct the car, overcorrected, skidded quite a ways and hit two trees. His passenger luckily survived the accident. Physically, you know, he was hurt, but pretty much, you know, that's it.

You know when we do these talks, and we do them so often, I always tell, you know, the audience no matter whether it's the teens, the parents, whatever the case may be, that even though it's been over four and a half years, you know, we're all approaching our fifth year in December, it doesn't get any easier to talk about it. I know this is a short, compared to our 90-minute regular program, so it's kind of short and sweet and to the point, but it is very emotional for us. It brings back the whole day, night, all over again, just like it was just yesterday. And it's hard. It's very difficult for us to do.

But, you know, we're always asked, how can you do this? You know, and we always say the same thing, because our sons would not expect anything less of us. And as hard as it is for us to do it, we know we have to. For their sake, it's like we are, one of you says it, you know, we all probably

say it, we are their voices. We are the warnings to, you know, their peers that this can happen to anyone, and it does.

**JANICE PALMER:** I'd like to say that the audience, that the students, they're remarkably silent through these presentations. And we do see tissue boxes passed around, and some students even have to leave because I think they really feel it because it really could be one of them. Or that they are lucky to be around because they may have done behaviors that our children did. So it's an eye-opener for them, and they come out of the auditorium, they're very receptive to us. They all -- I had one young man tell me, you don't know how much you've just changed by life, and he was crying. And he was like a big football physique-type student. And it just -- I knew then that I was doing the right thing even though it was painful. I had to continue.

**ERNIE BERTOTHY:** Janice, how does that make you feel? Because, you know, it's one thing to notice the reactions of kids when you're looking out into the audience, but when you actually have kids who may be shy, who may not want to go up to someone who just told a very emotional story, and they tell you, you just changed my life, how does that feel?

**JANICE PALMER:** That makes me feel good that what I'm doing is worthwhile and that I'm able to help him in that way to open up his eyes, and to save his life. I mean, that's a wonderful feeling.

**CONNIE JASCOWSKI:** It's incredible, like Janice says, you know, how these kids will react afterwards. You know, kids that like you wouldn't expect that it would be affecting and, you know, because we watch them while we're talking. We look into the audience, you know. Especially when we do our video, which is extremely emotional. I've gone out on several occasions during the video after I've seen kids go out there and talk to them, you know. And it will

bring up feelings of not just losing someone to an accident, but you know, I've just lost my mother recently. And you know, this and that, and all of these things. And they'll talk to us where they may not have talked to a counselor about how they're feeling. They will talk to us.

But after the presentations, when we go out there and we line up, and these kids are coming up and they're looking at our kids collages and they're hugging us and crying and, you know, literally picking us up off the floor, you know, we've had that happen. It's an amazing feeling. We still will get emails, you know, and phone calls from kids that have seen our program years ago. And it's like, I just got my license. I remember everything. They will name our kids. It's just an incredible feeling to know that they after, you know, it's not just a one-day thing or a two-day thing, that they're still remembering.

**SHERRI CHAPMAN:** And now if I could --

**ERNIE BERTOTHY:** Sherri.

**SHERRI CHAPMAN:** I would like to direct you to our website,

mourningparentsact.org, that's M-O-U-R-N-I-N-G Parents A-C-T dot org.

There you will be able to read testimonials from both students and school administrators, educators, commenting on the power of our program.

And I would also like to add that we do not charge these schools for our presentations. The message is too important. We have been places to present, we've been to high schools who wouldn't have been able to afford to pay for our presentation.

We do accept donations and we're very grateful to those who do consider our cause worthy enough to donate to and we have received many generous gifts.

**ERNIE BERTOTHY:** There is another part to this equation, and you do go to schools and talk to school children, but there's also another group that you reach out

to, and you have a separate program for parents, educators and law enforcement. Would one of you like to discuss that part of your presentation that apparently is different from the presentation that you give to the high school students?

**CONNIE JASCOWSKI:** The main difference between the teen program and the parent PTO whatever group, is that with the parents we talk to them about the brain development, which is a very crucial thing. It's been coming up more and more. You know, you're seeing articles about it all the time. But, you know, the brain development, the brain doesn't fully develop until you're 25 years old. And the last part of the brain to develop is the frontal lobe, which is all your judgment, your concentration, your decision-making, you know, any numerous things. So here, you know, as I turn up, what business do we have handing the keys to a 3,000 pound potential weapon to a 16-year-old who doesn't mentally have the capabilities of handling the situations that they may find themselves in.

You know, one of our goals is to raise the age. I think that would be ideal. And we've actually had parents ask, we have a petition that they can sign. We talk to them and stress the importance of the graduated licensing law, explaining to them, you know, how they need to help. We can only do so much. But they need to help enforce this with their children.

I don't know. Is there anything else that we -- the difference?

**JANICE PALMER:** Well, with the kids, following the emotional aspect of our program, we talk about deadly distractions and the graduated licensing law. With the parents, as Connie just mentioned, we talk more about the development of the frontal lobe and the GLA laws, but we don't so much go into the deadly distractions.

**ERNIE BERTOTHY:** Now, with the experience each of you has had, just staying on the point about parents for a second, what probably would you say is the most important piece of advice that you could give to a parent? And I'll open the floor up, Connie, Janice, Sherri. Janice.

**JANICE PALMER:** Well, I believe I would like to -- what I do is I explain to them to always be involved in your kids regardless of what they may say to you. I remember with my son, he always thought that I was too much of a worry mom and whatnot. And that kind of hurt me at times, but I knew the reason why I was doing it. And I kept telling him that it was my right to worry, and so on and so forth. So just to be always on top of your kids. Who, what, where, when, why. And to -- I used to share articles with Dan, and I ask that they do too as a reminder to them when bad situations happen to other people, have your children read the articles, just to be straightforward with them and to, you know, know where they are at all times and who they're with. That sometimes makes a difference as well.

**ERNIE BERTOTHY:** Sure. Thank you, Janice. Sherri, Connie, anything to add to what Janice said?

**SHERRI CHAPMAN:** Well, I would just like to urge parents to take the graduated licensing laws seriously and enforce them in your household. They are there to protect your kids, not to punish them or inconvenience you.

Teens need a period of time to drive under restricted licenses so that they gain the experience they need to drive safely in higher risk scenarios. Nighttime driving is particularly risky when you compare miles driven. In any given mile driven, teens are twice as likely to be in a fatal crash at night between the hours of 9:00 and 6:00 a.m. versus day. And the risk of a fatal crash increases incrementally with the number of passengers in a teen's car.

Studies have shown that teens are two times more likely to crash when they have one additional passenger in the car, and five times more likely to crash with three or more passengers. And it isn't always the driver at fault who dies, as in my case. It's often the passengers or occupants of another vehicle. So please, take the graduated licensing restrictions seriously and be mindful of who your children are riding with.

**ERNIE BERTOTHY:** Thank you, Sherri. Connie, do you have anything else you'd like to add?

**CONNIE JASCOWSKI:** Yes. What I'd like to add is don't try to be your kid's friend. Be their parent. From the time that you're pregnant or, you know that you have your child, you spend all your time protecting them. This should be no different just because they're older, they have their license, and you think they're maturing. We still have an obligation to protect our children. So be a parent, not a friend. Be strict with them. And don't fool yourself as to thinking that you know when they walk out of the house where they're going to be. Open your eyes.

All of our kids were good kids. All honor students, sports, you know, good kids, not getting into trouble. But as they walked out of the house, well, at least in a couple circumstances here, didn't know what they were doing. You know, and you don't.

**ERNIE BERTOTHY:** Another point that comes to mind is that besides calling one of you up and asking you to present at a place, is there any other way people can get involved with your group? And if they do, how can they get in touch with you?

**CONNIE JASCOWSKI:** Definitely. We are desperate for volunteers. Our organization is getting very big, we've got a lot of things going on, and we are

desperate for volunteers. We need people who know accounting, you know, secretarial, clerical things, even just to do mailings. Whatever. They can contact me directly. This is Connie Jascowski at 860-666-5639.

I also want to let them know that if they themselves have suffered a loss and need to talk, or if friends of theirs need to know how to help them deal, cope, they can also call me for that. I'm available for intervention.

**ERNIE BERTOTHY:** This whole discussion really underscores one very basic point, and that is just what a responsibility it is to drive a motor vehicle. And Sherri, if you want to just add something.

**SHERRI CHAPMAN:** 6,000 teens are killed every year in car crashes in the United States and another 300,000 are injured. It's an epidemic, the largest public health crisis in America. It's like two 911 attacks a year, except these attacks are targeting our teens. We've got to stop standing by complacently, horrified by each crash we hear, but doing nothing. We have to join together to do everything we can to stop this right now.

**ERNIE BERTOTHY:** Sherri, thank you very much. I thank each of you for coming out today and sharing your story, and certainly good luck with everything you have going on with the future. So Sherri, Janice, Connie, thank you.

**ALL:** Thank you for having us. Thank you.

**ERNIE BERTOTHY:** This is Ernie Bertothy, Infocast Editor. You've listened to a podcast produced by the State of Connecticut Department of Motor Vehicles. Thank you for listening.