

Drinking, driving and living past 17

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

Meg Ryan, a senior at Our Lady of Mercy High School in Brighton, "died" May 19 — but lived to tell the tale.

On that day, Meg played the role of a victim in a fatal drunk-driving accident staged for her classmates in the high school's driveway. She noted that the dramatization made her ponder the reality of death at a young age.

"I think this is the closest, at least I hope, that I'm going to get," she remarked.

That hope was shared by the demonstrations' organizers, including anti-drunk-driving activists, students, school officials, the Brighton Fire Department and the Monroe County Sheriff's Department. This is the second year the school has presented such a dramatization, according to Tracy Vander, a school counselor. Mercy officials believe the staged accident is an effective way to make students think about the perils of driving drunk during prom season — and forever afterward.

"I think it has a huge impact (on the girls) just seeing some of their classmates involved," she said.

"If it saves one life, it helped," added Ken Ferg, a paramedic and firefighter who participated in the event.

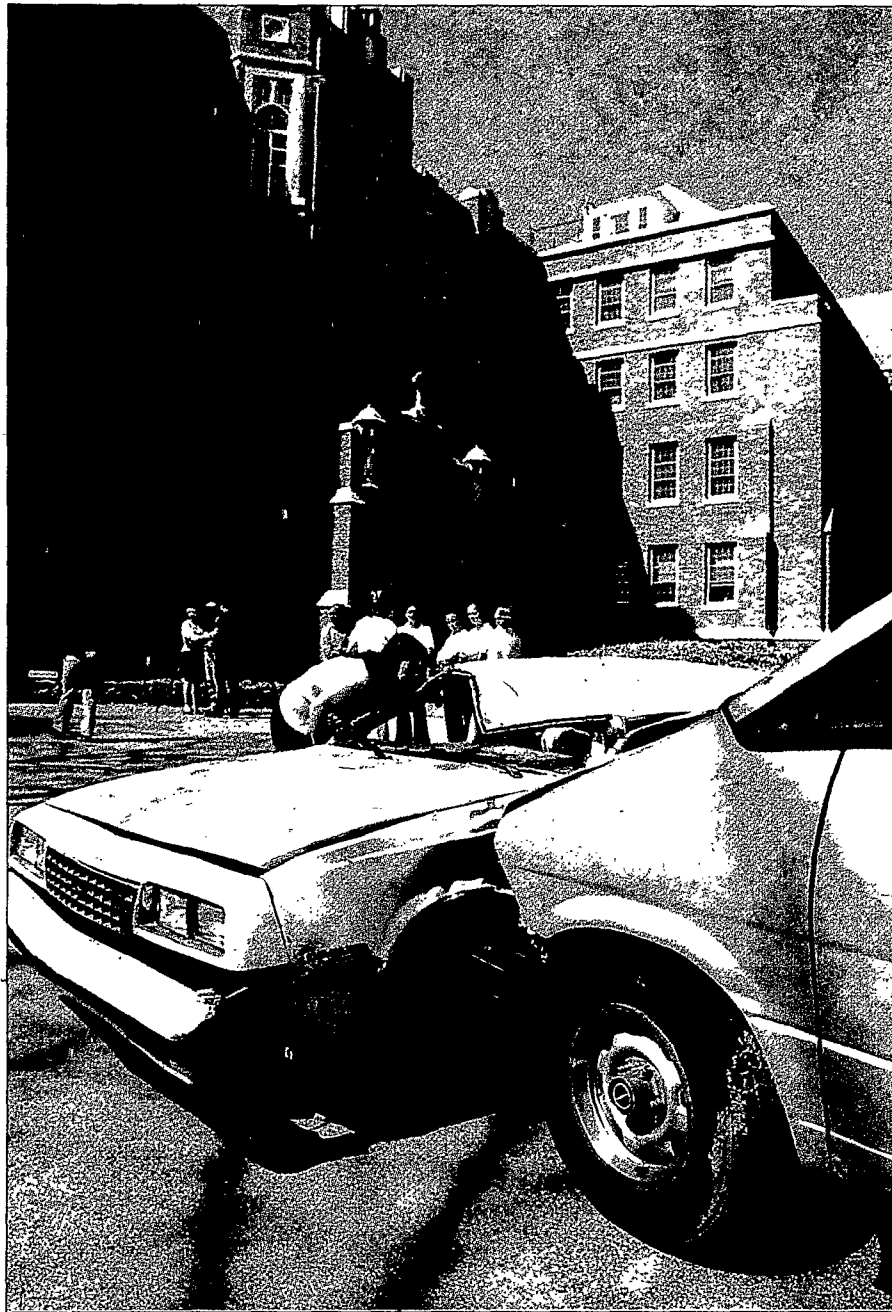
Senior Maggie Fleche played a drunken driver whose vehicle crashed into a compact car occupied by senior Aimee Lambert, whose character was injured, and Meg, whose character was killed. Maggie said she had been joking a little with her companion in the van, senior Kelly Tallinger, but stopped when they heard the sirens of fire vehicles as they rushed to campus as part of the simulation.

"As soon as the sirens came, and the trucks came, it was real," Maggie said. "I couldn't even imagine what it was like before going through this."

What it's like is tragic and awful, according to Monroe County Sheriff's Deputy Dan Lyon, who said he has seen enough accident scenes for one lifetime.

"I'm *there* when I'm doing this," Lyon said when asked about becoming emotional as he narrated the dramatization. "It's hard to see it."

During his narration, Lyons continually hammered home the seriousness of what the young women were witnessing. He stressed the extreme pain accident victims may suffer, even if they only wait for a few minutes for an ambulance to arrive. And he noted that Maggie's character was going to be hand-



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Seniors at Our Lady of Mercy High School begin to gather to watch a simulated drunk-driving accident on the school grounds May 19.

cuffed and arrested for what she did — that her van would be searched for drugs and other illegal material — and that he would have to wake up the parents of the dead driver in the middle of the night to tell them the bad news.

"This a crime scene," Lyon told the students. "Someone's going to get arrested. This is not child's play because someone chose to drink and drive."

Lyon's words apparently affected the students, some of whom wiped tears from their eyes during the presentation.

"The dramatization of it made it more realistic," said senior Jessica Kowalski. "It does have an effect on you."

Her friend, Anne Pomeroy, added

that she's already taken to heart the message authorities wanted the students to hear. She said she has even driven older adults home from parties because they had been drinking and she had not.

"I always make sure I'm the one driving because I don't drink," Anne said.

Stephen Annunziata, president of Tri-County Mothers Against Drunk Driving, covering Monroe, Wayne and Livingston counties, spoke to the students and said afterward that he wished his stepbrother, Jaimie Musolino, had heard the same message. Unfortunately, his stepbrother was killed because he drove drunk, Annunziata said, adding that too often, people have to suffer the loss of a relative before they stop their own



Senior Katie Way watches the staged accident.

drinking and driving.


"I hate that examples like that have to happen for people to cease," he said.

However, Lyon noted that the staged accident scenes do act as a permanent deterrent for some students. He said, for example, that he recently met a woman who saw him do a similar dramatization at her school six years ago. The woman told him that she still makes safe and sound decisions about driving after drinking in order to avoid what his presentation warned might happen.

At least one student appeared affected in the manner that Lyon wanted — the "drunken driver" herself.

"I won't even think twice about drinking and driving," Maggie said.


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