

Can shocking account of deaths on the road change the way we drive?

It's not every day you see a firefighter cry in front of 300 college students. **Craig Blackburn** visits a hard-hitting road safety road show designed to shock young drivers into changing their behaviour, and emerges a little shaky himself

I CONSIDER myself a safe driver – I always wear my seatbelt and never drink and drive. I occasionally exceed the speed limit – but who doesn't? I also sometimes read texts while driving. A bad habit, I know.

But it is one which I've stopped after sitting in on the Learn 2 Live road safety show at Princess Pavilions in Falmouth.

The video sets the scene – four teenagers in a car with music playing, laughter, and playing with a mobile phone. We hear a crash, see the car on the grass verge, and most of the passengers are moaning, but moving. One is unconscious.

A police officer arrives, the video stops, and a patrol officer in full uniform approaches the podium.

"All too often this is where I come into people's lives as that senior investigation officer," says Sergeant Aaron Bevan to 250, Year 12 students.

He tells of the first fatal car crash he attended in September 2007 – "abject devastation". "The car had gone airborne, took out a sign and hit a tree and rolled," he says.

"It didn't look good for the passenger." "The front seat passenger, Luke Cooper, did not survive. "The driver, Tony, has to live the rest of his life knowing that he killed a friend," says Aaron.

"We proved that the car was going too fast. "Luke, also, never liked wearing a seatbelt. "It is such a waste of a life." There is a pause.

"After seven years these things don't go away," he says. "They stay with everybody involved. "That's why I have come here today. "Make sure everyone in the car wears a seatbelt.

"If not, that unrestrained passenger is going to bounce around that car like a pinball – it's just physics."

As he leaves the stage, the video starts up again. The teenage girl is trapped and being cut out of a front passenger seat – the spot which people like Sergeant Bevan call the "sacrificial seat".

There is the sound of glass cracking, close-ups of the car being cut, and ten or so emergency personnel. Entering the stage is firefighter Mike Parker, a giant of a man, who recalls a two-car collision between a Range Rover and a blue Cavalier.

"The Cavalier was the same make, model and colour as mine, just a different number plate," he tells the students. "In the front were two men,



Working together to reduce road casualties among young people in our communities

■ The Learn 2 Live driver safety campaign at Princess Pavillion, Falmouth — the campaign's hard-hitting banner.

Picture: Colin Higgs

both trapped. In the back there should have been two children.

"But one was thrown through the windscreen, the other was in the foot well." Mr Parker says the driver of the Range Rover had been drinking. The children had not been wearing seatbelts and died.

"There was no reason for those two kids to die, no reason whatsoever," he adds. He went home, checked on his own children, safely asleep in bed, and went downstairs. "I made a cup of tea, and cried," he says.

"Me, a 6ft fireman. I cried. All I could think about was my two kids."

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I saw a man sitting in his car staring at the windscreen and what looked like rags on the ground. The pile of clothes was a body of an 8-year-old girl

Barry Gibson retired paramedic

His voice cracks and he breaks down momentarily. "So please, all I ask, just for me, is 'wear your seatbelts'."

Back on the video, paramedics are in the ambulance with the casualty, who is going into cardiac arrest.

Retired paramedic Barry Gibson, from the South Western Ambulance Service, takes the podium and talks about arriving on the scene of an accident some 34 years ago.

"I saw a man sitting in his car staring at the windscreen and what looked like rags on the ground," he says. "The pile of clothes was a body of an 8-year-old girl. She had run across the road from the school bus to see her mum. The driver of the car had sped up to pass the bus."

The girl was pronounced

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When I placed the blanket over her body I heard a horrible scream from behind me. It was her mum, who didn't know she had died.

Barry Gibson retired paramedic

dead at the scene. "When I placed the blanket over her body I heard a horrible scream from behind

me," he adds. "It was her mum, who didn't know she had died."

The video plays again. The female casualty is now in the hospital, surrounded by doctors trying to restart her heart, without success.

The scene cuts to a couple at home as a police officer approaches the door, taking in a deep breath, about to deliver the 'death message'.

As the camera pans away with the sound of the mother sobbing, MPC Mark Leath, a family liaison officer with Devon and Cornwall Police, takes to the stage. He has spent 25 years working at the safer roads unit in Camborne. He said: "I have

the road change the way we drive?

picked up heads, brains and severed arms and legs, watched people burn to death and seen people die in my arms. "I know that all the images, sights and sounds, and the people I have met, because of these accidents, will remain with me for the rest of my life.

"I can deal with all of it, except the death message, because you ruin the life and aspirations and future plans they had with their loved ones who are now dead."

In the video dramatisation, the girl did not make it. The next presenter, Amanda Torr, is possibly the bravest person to take the stage.

Her daughter, Rebecca, died in a car accident near Truro in 2005 on the way home from work one night. Amanda was woken at 2.30am by a family liaison officer.

"I don't really remember much about it after that," she says. "I can't even describe it to you. "I had to tell Megan that her sister wasn't coming home and my parents, who are in their seventies, that their granddaughter had died."

Amanda also had to identify her daughter's body in the morgue, and sit through an inquest nine months later. "That is an experience I hope I never have to go through again."

Amanda has been a guest speaker as part of the Learn 2 Live project for five years. "I carry

my loved one in my heart," she says. "Please don't allow that to happen to you."

Last up was Pete, who tells us, from a video screen, how he crashed his new sports car when he was 18.

"Luckily for me, the other car hit my passenger door," he says. "I was left with whiplash and a scar on my hand. "What I haven't told you is that I had picked up my best friend that morning and he was sat right next to me."

His friend died later that night. "I didn't know what to say. My best friend was laid there because of what I had done. Saying goodbye was hard. I kissed him on the forehead."

By the end of the video, Pete is turning away from the camera, holding back the tears, struggling to speak. Behind his watery, bloodshot eyes, the pain is obvious, even 14 years later.

"I learnt my lesson that day," he finally says. "I'm here to touch on that lesson so that you don't have to." When I left the auditorium, I was shaken up.

As I walked out and saw the whole team waiting for me, I couldn't speak. All I could do was shake their hands and nod my head – hoping to communicate that the message had hit home, even for this 40-year-old motorist, and that I was grateful.



■ Motor Patrol Sergeant Aaron Bevan at the Learn 2 Live driver safety campaign.

Picture: Colin Higgs

Teens say presentation has had an impact



■ Student Zachary Cashmore.



■ Student Keda Wright.



■ Student Dan Atkinson.

BEFORE the presentation, Zachary Cashmore, who is 17 and learning to drive, said: "We're expecting to learn what a car can do and to learn how to drive responsibly."

"We've been told we are going to see car accidents and hear personal stories." Afterwards, he said: "It hasn't put me off driving but it definitely made me aware. It's changed me. "It's brought it home to me and made it real, it's not just a thing you see on the news any more."

Keda Wright, aged 16, said before the show: "I'm not sure what we are going to see, but I've got an open mind. Afterwards, she said: "It actually quite shocked me. We are young and we don't think about things like that. "It affects other people's lives, it doesn't just affect your life. "Actually, I'm one for not wearing my seat belt. I'm going to change that."

Dan Atkinson, who is 17 and learning to drive, said, before the presentation: "We've been told we're going to be taught how powerful cars are and to hear experiences from emergency services." After the event, he said: "It was pretty hard-hitting – I realised that the smallest change can change your life forever. "The experiences they shared were powerful, people don't think how it affects the emergency services." All three are studying at Truro and Penwith College.

Putting a price on crash death – and saving life – in Cornwall



■ The Learn 2 Live road safety team, from left, Tracy Porter, road safety officer; Mike Parker, firefighter; Barry Gibson, retired paramedic; MPC Mark Leath, family liaison officer from the safer roads unit in Camborne; Amanda Torr, guest parent speaker; Sergeant Aaron Bevan; Madeleine Tidbury Thorne, team counsellor; Darren Berry, road safety project co-ordinator.

EVERY time someone dies on Cornwall's road during a crash, it costs more than £1 million.

The whole operation involves the emergency services, healthcare professionals, insurance companies, legal system, coroner's office and counsellors. Last year, the Learn 2 Live team delivered its presentation to 7,500 students through roadshows and school visits, costing 42p per student.

The total cost was just over £3,000. The Cornwall project, which has been running for six years, is managed by Tracy Porter and co-ordinated by Darren Berry, who both work for the prevention, protection and road safety team as part of the Cornwall Fire and Rescue Service.

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