Grim Reaper brings drunk-driving message to students

BY ROGER VARLEY
Staff Writer

Almost 80 students were visited by the Grim Reaper at Brother Andre Catholic High School in Markham yesterday.

Every 20 minutes, the squeal of tires and the rending of metal — the sounds of a car crash — were heard over the public address system. Inevitably, the recording was followed by the appearance of the tall, gaunt, black-draped figure of death, come to claim a victim.

His appearance often was greeted by a combination of smiles and nervous giggles as the students wondered who was to be taken away. But there were also looks of alarm. And then there was silence as the victim was thrown over the Grim Reaper's shoulder and carried away.

Once identified as victims, students were taken to the "morgue" — a sealed-off washroom in the cafeteria area — where they were dressed in black, with faces painted white and eyes blackened, and then returned to the populace to learn what it meant to be dead.

No talking to anyone. No participating in class discussions. No answering or asking of questions.

At lunch time, the victims were required to eat at a table draped with black plastic garbage bags, segregated from the rest of the student body.

Across the front of the stage that runs along one side of the cafeteria, tombstones were erected, adorned with photographs of the "deceased."

Four students were taken from the classrooms every 20 minutes to reflect statistics that show someone is killed or injured by an impaired driver every five minutes.

The event was staged by the school's branch of Ontario Students Against Impaired Driving (OSAID) on the last day of a week-long impaired driving awareness program.

"Most of the teachers are 100 percent behind us," said the school's OSAID president, Karen Brockest. "Most of the teachers respect what we are doing and won't ask the victims direct questions."

And if any of the victims were seen talking?

"We go up and yell at them," said Brockest. "They've got to be serious if they want to get the message across."

Vice-president Jody Chrobak said some students were receiving the message.

"One Grade 9 girl started to cry when her friend was taken away," she said.

Student Shari Russell discovered in a small way what it's like to lose a friend.

She attempted to communicate with her friend — one of the victims — during lunch hour, but was met by silence.

"It's frustrating," she said. "I'm trying to find out something from her that's important to me at this moment."

But she agreed the exercise was effective.

"I'd be very sad if I lost my friend," said Russell. "This shows us how to save our lives and our friends' lives."

Victim Kristin Wilkins, who observed the no-talking edict by speaking to the Economist & Sun/Tribune only inside the "morgue," said some fellow students had tried to goad her into talking when she returned to her class, "but I didn't."

"I never shut up, normally, so when I can't talk, it kills me," she said, apparently unaware of the irony of her statement.

Angela Barbosa sat in the cafeteria casting more than the occasional glance at the table reserved for the "dead."

"I think it's a good way to express what's happening," she said.

She admitted that when the Grim Reaper visited her classroom to claim the "class clown," her reaction was "like, 'oh yeah.' "

"But it makes you think how many people drink and drive," she added.

And if the Grim reaper's visits weren't enough, students passing through the main lobby were greeted with the sight of three bodies lying in a corner under sheets — one of them an infant.

Brockest, Chrobak and co-vice president Sabrina Azeez said they had been planning the awareness week since summer.

"This week, we've lived and breathed OSAID," said Azeez, noting members of the group arrived at school yesterday at 7 a.m., and would spend the entire day devoted to the Grim Reaper event.

Chrobak said every student interviewed at the start of the school year with a view to joining OSAID knew at least two people who were either guilty of drinking and driving or had been affected by a drunk driver.

"One of my uncles was hit by a drunk driver," said Chrobak. "He lived, but it shakes you up."

Brockest said the daughter of a school secretary was killed in an accident involving a drunk driver.

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