

Tribune (Welland)

Don't cross the 'stupid line': SmartRisk heroes brings message to notre dame students

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Illustrations: Photo: Angus Scott, Photo / Marlena Desjardins, a Grade 10 student at Notre Dame College school, talks with Adrian Dieleman, who presented a personal safety and choices multimedia program to students on Friday.

Accidents are usually predictable.

Therefore, they're preventable.

That message was brought home in a dramatic way to hundreds of students at Notre Dame College school on Friday morning during a presentation by SmartRisk Heroes.

The multimedia show started with a series of exciting clips of people taking part in high-risk activities, like skydiving, speed events, parachuting off buildings and cliffs. The opening had the Notre Dame students cheering.

Those cheers turned to groans, however, as the show quickly cut to images of injuries suffered by people trying to perform those high-risk events.

The lights then went out and were replaced by a single spotlight focussed on injury survivor Adrian Dieleman.

Now living in Hamilton and working as a pastor with Hamilton Health Sciences, Dieleman's appearance alone on stage in a wheelchair silenced the audience.

His subsequent discussion with the students, in which he warned them against crossing what he called the "stupid line," caught their attention.

"They're usually telling you not to take risks," said Grade 10 student Marlena Desjardins. "This was different."

The goal of the program is not to stop people from taking risks, said Dieleman.

"Taking risks is part of life, it makes us feel alive," he said. "But it's not smart risk."

Instead, SmartRisk offers five practical tips for managing the risks which come with life.

That approach obviously impressed the students.

"It made me think about stuff I do more," said Grade 9 student Devon Egerter. "If I'm out with friends and they try to persuade me to do stuff, I'll be more cautious."

"It made me realize how little things can make such a big difference," said Grade 10 student Stephanie Della Smirra.

"I'm going to think twice about everything," said her friend Jessica Gaudet.

"Telling a group of teenagers they shouldn't do something is like waving a red flag in front of a bull," said Dieleman after the presentation. It only encourages them to rebel and do the very thing they've been told not to, he said.

It's better to offer them realistic ways of analyzing situations and making good decisions, he said.

The SmartRisk Heroes program was brought to Notre Dame by the Welland Safe Communities Partnership and the Pelham Community Policing Committee.

SmartRisk is a national nonprofit organization, founded in 1992, dedicated to preventing injuries and saving lives.

Dieleman himself is a quadriplegic, injured in a drinking and driving accident when he was 22.

He bluntly shared his story with the Notre Dame students and urged them to make smarter decisions than he did.

"It was the worst choice I ever made," he said of his decision to get behind the wheel of a car while impaired.

"All I know is I went from being a 22-year-old young man who thought he was invincible to being a person who couldn't feel anything from the neck down."

Dieleman has since regained use of some parts of his body. He can use his arms to propel a wheelchair and is now able to play wheelchair tennis, a sport in which he is ranked second in Canada. He has hopes of representing this country in 2008 in Beijing at the Paralympic Games.

"The truth is 90 per cent of injuries are preventable, and therefore they're not really accidents," said Dieleman.

"Now, when I wake up in the morning and roll side to side trying to put on a pair of pants, something that takes a lot of time, I realize my life could have been so much different," he said.

There were times he wanted to give up, times he even

contemplated suicide.

But loving family and friends helped him realize there was still a lot to live for.

"I would do anything I could to prevent you from getting hurt," said Dieleman.

"But this isn't about me. It's your life, your responsibility. Statistics indicate accidental injury kills more young people than all other causes. The fact is by the time you turn 20, it's likely you will know somebody who has been seriously injured."

THE FACTS

There are five practical steps that will help you manage risk before taking part in any activity, said Adrian Dieleman of SmartRisk Heroes.

They are:

- Buckle Up - this applies not just to seatbelts in cars, but to equipment of any kind.

- Look First - check out your environment before you start any activity. "If you don't know what you're getting into, you don't know what can hit you," said Dieleman.

- Wear the Gear - make sure you're wearing the proper protective equipment associated with whatever activity you're involved in.

- Get Trained - whether it's a new sports activity or new job, get proper instruction before you start. In terms of employment, "It's your right and responsibility to get trained."

- Drive Sober - this applies to more than not drinking and driving. Any type of impairment or distraction, be it sleep or talking on the cellphone, should be avoided while driving.

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