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Tragedies spur service project

Wakefield senior draws on students' deaths to spread anti-alcohol message



Bruce Wittman, left, of Eagle Video Productions, and Wakefield student Chris Creech review a scene during the filming of a public service announcement discouraging drinking and driving, set to air in July at Wakefield's Marquee Cinemas.

Staff Photos By Travis Long

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By LISA MCLEMORE, Correspondent

RALEIGH -- It took a tragic evening to turn Chris Creech's church project into something more than just a creative ending to his senior year.

Creech's public-service video, titled "3-D: Don't Drink and Drive," began last fall as a senior leadership project for his Wake Forest Baptist Church youth group. He chose his theme at random, thinking it was a topic familiar to most teens.

Then, on March 4, Creech lost four of his Wakefield High School senior classmates in an alcohol-related car accident. That was when Creech, 18, decided to boost his efforts to spread his message.

"After the wreck, the project became a lot more personal to me," Creech said. He wrote and directed the project's public service announcement, which is expected to air on local television stations next week -- in time for many area high school graduations.

"I knew if we could reach people in the community affected by that wreck, we could maybe change some minds about drinking and driving," he said.

To try to change perceptions about drunken driving, Creech used a technique called "the social-norms approach" while scripting the project.

Developed by Wesley Perkins, a professor of sociology at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in New York, the technique emphasizes that responsible behavior among young people is normal. Creech's project shows sober young people in a party setting and their negative reaction to a drunken peer.

"If you can let students know that most people their age don't do drugs or get drunk every night, then they will feel less pressure to participate in those types of extreme behavior and less tolerant of the risky behavior of others," said Perkins.

Les Burleson, Creech's youth minister, said the project deglamorizes the excuse that "Everyone is doing it."

"Most teens aren't doing it," Burleson said. "Let's show that the glass is half full, not half empty, and let peer pressure work in a positive way."

Creech's project has received endorsements from various authorities, including Lt. Gov. Beverly Perdue, U.S. Rep. Brad Miller and the Wake County Sheriff's Office. The county Board of Alcohol Beverage Control gave Creech a \$25,000 grant to cover production and distribution costs.

"What the board saw in Chris was a mature, responsible, caring young man who wants to make a difference in Wake County," said Craig Pleasants, the board's general manager.

The project's first phase, Creech's 30-second public-service video, relied on about 50 volunteers. It was filmed at a private pool and a local church cemetery. Lorraine Miano, who provided her family's pool for the filming, said she was happy to feel a part of something positive in a year marked by loss.

"It's inspiring to see kids want to do something about this tragedy," said Miano, whose daughter,

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Marissa, is Wakefield High's senior class president. "They're determined to make a difference and make sure it doesn't happen to any other classmates or to any teens anywhere."

During the ad's shooting, Eagle Video Productions' owner Bruce Wittman of Raleigh was on hand to provide technical expertise and a three-man crew to film the footage.

"When you've got the power of video and the power of a positive message, that's strong; I love harnessing it for the good," Wittman said.

Wittman appealed to fellow members of the Media Communications Association-International for further help on the project. About 15 media specialists eventually volunteered in areas such as lighting, audio and editing. The project even scored an original soundtrack composition by Willie Elias of Raleigh's Blazing Music + Sound.

By late July, Creech's video is expected to begin airing as a movie ad at Marquee Cinemas - Wakefield 12.

Creech also plans to produce a peer-to-peer discussion video by late summer. He hopes it will be shown at a social-norms training workshop lead by Perkins and to all Wakefield High freshmen as part of their health curriculum.

Creech said he hopes that everyone who views his videos remembers that much of the inspiration came from a real-life tragedy.

"The message is stronger because it's made by high school kids who have suffered a loss," Creech said. "That makes it more personal, more real, whether you know us or not."

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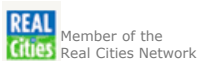
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