

Message on a Bottle

Students discourage impaired driving with decorative LCBO bags



Halle Higgins, left, and Riley Purdie, both Grade 7 students at St. Joseph Catholic Elementary School in River Canard, pose with some of the hundreds of decorative LCBO bags in their school's hallway.

(Amherstburg, Ontario, Dec. 12, 2014) – Students from St. Joseph Catholic Elementary School are hoping there will be a lot fewer impaired drivers in their area this Christmas season.

The entire student body at the River Canard school is behind an annual initiative to curb drunk driving. The students make decorative bottle bags which have messages discouraging people from getting behind the wheel if they've been consuming alcohol. The bags are then provided to the Amherstburg LCBO store, which uses them to package bottles of liquor when they're sold.

"Before you start your car you have to think," said Josie Sleiman, a Grade 7 student at the school. "You could be destroying someone else's life."

The initiative is spear-headed by Val Pelaccia, a Grade 7 teacher at the school, who started it 14 years ago when he was still teaching at St. John the Evangelist school in Woodslee, and brought it to St. Joseph when he transferred there several years ago. During that time, he estimates students have made more than 8,000 bags.

“The customers at the store have already started asking for them,” said Pelaccia, who expects his school will make about 500 bags this year, which should be delivered sometime next week. “It’s an annual event that everyone looks forward to.”

Selia Dion, another Grade 7 student at the school, has a personal reason for getting behind the project. Her mother and her Nonna were hit by a drunk driver several years ago. They’ve both recovered from their injuries, but Dion knows it could have been much worse for her loved ones.

“You have to think about your kids, and what you could be doing to innocent people,” she said.

Before becoming a teacher, Pelaccia worked as an ambulance attendant.

“I had to go to a lot of accident scenes, and that has an effect on you,” he said, adding that he thought such an initiative may be a way to reduce the number of unfortunate and avoidable incidents like the ones he witnessed.

According to Statistics Canada, increased police enforcement and raised awareness about the dangers of impaired driving may be working. The rate of impaired driving causing death dropped 29 per cent in 2011, reaching its lowest point in over 25 years. In 2006, it reached a low of 234 incidents per 100,000 people. By 2011, the rate had dropped to 121 incidents, or 0.35 per 100,000 people.

Still, people continue to get behind the wheel when they’ve had too much to drink, and members of the Amherstburg police service are grateful for the students’ help in getting out the message that everyone is affected by impaired driving, said community services constable Steve Owen.

“Even though they’re not old enough to drink or drive they still understand the importance of the message and we certainly appreciate the awareness they’re creating,” he said.