

Teen driving program to get grant

By Tom Grace

Cooperstown News Bureau

COOPERSTOWN _ A Cooperstown woman's campaign to improve driver's education programs bore fruit Monday morning at Cooperstown Middle-High School.

At 9:30 a.m., state Sen. James Seward, R-Milford, announced that the school would receive a \$35,000 grant to institute "a 21st century driver training program."

With the grant, the school will be able to offer extensive training, including time on a driving simulator and in a new driver's education car, to make its students safer behind the wheel.

Just over a year ago, Penney Gentile's son, Chris, a senior at Cooperstown, died from injuries after he lost control of his Jeep and it rolled over on Route 33 in Middlefield. He didn't have his seat belt on and was ejected from the car, according to Karen Liddle, the county's STOP-DWI coordinator.

Vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death for people between the ages of 15 and 20, Seward said. "Teen drivers, mile to mile, are in three times as many fatal crashes as all other drivers."

To help these new drivers, preparatory courses need to be rigorous, he said, noting that the state Senate has passed a bill, 6,985, to establish a commission that would make recommendations on how to prepare young drivers better, require parents or legal guardians to attend court when teen drivers are ticketed and increase the hours learners must be supervised.

Cooperstown will now set up a program to be offered in the fall and spring, according to Gary Kuch, Cooperstown High School principal.

The program is overdue, said Seward.

"I hope this program will become a model for schools around the state," said Seward, who was joined at the dais by officials and Gentile of Nelson Avenue, Cooperstown.

The tragedy of losing her son led Gentile, who operates a bed-and-breakfast in the village, to realize how poorly prepared many young drivers are when they first take to the road.

"I was speaking to a guest about how we need better driver's courses and I was told, 'there's someone in Georgia already working on that,'" Gentile said Monday.

She contacted Alan Brown, of Georgia, whose son, Joshua Brown, had perished in 2003 when his truck hit a puddle, hydroplaned and hit a tree.

In his son's memory, Brown has formed the Joshua Brown Foundation, an organization dedicated to making sure teen drivers are ready to drive before they're given licenses.

Late last year, Brown traveled to Cooperstown to speak about the need to reform driver education.

The campaign has produced a Senate bill and is awaiting action in the state Assembly, said Seward.

Cooperstown Central School Superintendent Mary Jo McPhail said the local program will be dedicated to Chris Gentile, and to Seward, for his efforts to secure funding.