

For father, driver's ed life's work

School board to hear story of loss



Joshua Brown died in a single car accident in summer 2003, just months after he posed for this pre-prom photo with his father. In the wake of their son's death, Alan and LuGina Brown started the Joshua Brown Foundation to push for driver's education programs.

Special



By Jeffery Whitfield | jeffery.whitfield@onlineathens.com |
Story updated at 12:38 AM on Thursday, January 11, 2007

A father whose 17-year-old son crashed and died after he made an inexperienced driving decision will share his story with the Clarke County Board of Education tonight, trying to convince school board members to reinstate driver's education.

"I want to explain how affordable it is, how cheap it can be," said Alan Brown, chairman of the Joshua Brown Foundation, a nonprofit group that promotes driver's education in schools.

Shortly after he graduated from Cartersville High School in 2003, Joshua Robert Brown died when his truck hydroplaned on a rain-slicked road and crashed into a tree.

In the days after he died, Joshua's parents, Alan and LuGina Brown, "dealt with grief and guilt" that their son didn't know what to do when he lost control while driving, according to the Joshua Brown Foundation.

"That emptiness turned into a personal crusade to make sure every teen has the opportunity to learn the skills necessary to drive safely," according to the foundation's Web site.

A Parent Advisory Board asked Brown to speak at the board's meeting tonight.

"We lose 44,000 Americans every year in car wrecks and it doesn't have to be that way," Brown said.

As he does when he talks to other school boards, Brown will start with an emotional appeal detailing his own experience.

If only Brown had known what to teach his son about driving, then the tragedy could've been prevented, he said.

"You don't want to be where I am now. I wish it had been me," Brown said.

His son's death spurred Brown to push for legislators to fund driver's education for teens, and in 2005, state lawmakers passed Joshua's Law, which requires 16-year-olds to take a state-approved driver's

education course and complete 40 hours of supervised driving to get a license to drive.

If Joshua had practiced on a driving simulator - which allows a teenager to rehearse how he would respond to driving hazards - he might have reacted better when his truck hydroplaned, Brown said.

"The simulator can put you in a crash over and over and over again," he said.

Brown will recommend that school board members consider making driving simulators a part of a future driver's education program.

Under one scenario, students could pay less than \$80 for driver's education that would include a course and driver training on a simulator, said Pat Wilder, executive director of the National Teen Research Center, now part of the Joshua Brown Foundation.

If computer-based training is used instead of the simulator, students could pay \$10 to \$12. Unlike the simulator, which shows students what they did wrong on trial runs, computer-based training teaches students basic driving rules, Wilder said.

"It is (like) an enhanced handbook," she said.

Neither scenario includes the cost of on-the-road driving, a vehicle or paying an instructor to teach the class and district officials still would have to hammer out the details of the course, Wilder said.

There is no data that driver's education helps prevent teen crashes, but researchers hope to compile that research as driver's training is added at Georgia schools, Wilder said.

"We believe the simulators and driver's training is effective," she said.

Board President Charles Worthy said officials don't yet know if or when the school district will again offer driver's education.

"I think somewhere in the near future driver's education will be included in all the (Georgia) high schools because of Joshua's Law," said Worthy. "That's my feeling."

The district dropped driver's education in 2004 and hasn't restarted the program because of cost, which an administrator estimated at \$25,000.

Commerce City Schools and the school systems in Madison, Jackson and Oconee counties offer driver's education for their students.

Georgia school systems don't receive state funding to pay for driver's education courses.

Published in the Athens Banner-Herald on 011107