

Deaths of friends prompts Apollo-Ridge student to act

By Brian C. Rittmeyer, VALLEY NEWS DISPATCH
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Courtney Gibson remembers the pain she felt when she was a high school freshman and her mother told her one of her friends had died in a car crash.

"It was one of those moments I will always remember," she said. "I was just a complete wreck the rest of that day."

Those memories and feelings came back for Gibson in this, her senior year, when two girls she knew died in a car crash in November.

But Gibson, 18, of Kiski Township was moved to more than grief.

She was moved to act.

She put together a safe driving week at Apollo-Ridge High School that she called "Realization Week," in hopes her friends and classmates will realize how the decisions they make behind the wheel can profoundly affect them and those around them.

The week will come to a close today, with an assembly featuring speakers whose lives have been changed after losing friends in car crashes.

Courtney's sister, Crista Gibson, 21, was to be one of the speakers.

Courtney says her sister was closer with Samantha Smith and Elisabeth Carney, both 19 and from Tarentum, who died in a one-car crash in Harrison in November.

According to friends and authorities, the two were on their way home from Wal-Mart late at night when they crossed the center line on Freeport Road, ran over a curb and crashed into a truck trailer parked in front of a towing company.

Because they crashed in front of a towing company, their smashed car didn't draw attention. Their bodies weren't found until morning.

Investigators have a theory, but the cause of the crash never officially was determined, Allegheny County Police homicide Sgt. Scott Scherer said on Thursday. He said Carney was driving the car at a high rate of speed, well over the posted speed limit.

Courtney first heard about their deaths on Facebook. She didn't want to believe it.

"The first thing I did was call my sister," she said. Her sister knew, and knew it was true.

She also got tragic news in 2008, when her friend, Emily Blystone, 17, died in a crash in Allegheny Township.

"It was just crazy. Being so young and dealing with something like this is hard, especially because it's not the first time," she said. "Dealing with your emotions and how you feel -- it's definitely a hard thing."

Teacher Emily Jones, an adviser of the SADD club at Apollo-Ridge of which Courtney is a member, was proud that Courtney cared enough to do something.

"If she wasn't as persistent as she was, this week wouldn't have happened," Jones said.

The week started with students signing pledges to be better drivers. Courtney wasn't sure how seriously fellow students were taking it.

For Courtney, the biggest part of the week was on Tuesday, when students and teachers wrote the names of people they knew who had been hurt or killed in car accidents on stickers and wore them all day.

Many wore stickers, and many had more than one name.

Courtney had three.

One person put two stickers together to list eight names. A teacher remembered her son, which Courtney said was hard to witness.

"I'm really, really happy we did that," she said. "That was the most helpful."

A seatbelt check was done as students left school on Wednesday, and most were using them.

On Thursday, Kiski Township police Patrolman Christian Disciscio presented an assembly called "Survival 101," which used graphic images of real car crashes and their victims to drive home the importance of wearing seatbelts and driving safely, not impaired and not distracted.

He told students what it's like for him to have to tell a parent that their son or daughter died in a car crash.

"This is the absolute worst part of my job," he said. "Anything else that happens I can deal with. This is terrible.

"The decisions you make might put me in that situation."

Courtney believes the personal messages in today's assembly will be closer and more effective as they talk about Samantha, Elisabeth and Emily.

"I'm hoping that really touches all the students," she said.

Courtney is hopeful the safe driving week won't be a one-time program, and Jones said she'll want to continue it.

"We need more students like her who make a stand on these issues and try to make a difference," Jones said.