



# BAKERSFIELD POLICE DEPARTMENT PRESS RELEASE

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On 9/16/09, the California Crime Prevention Officers Association named the "A Life Interrupted Program DUI Mobile Crash Exhibit" the **Crime Prevention Program of the Year for 2008**. This award recognizes outstanding performance in achieving crime prevention objectives by a law enforcement agency.

In a separate category, Bakersfield Police Department Crime Prevention Specialist, Tony Martinez was named **Practitioner of the Year** for Region 10 (Central Valley) for outstanding commitment to Crime Prevention efforts in Bakersfield. Martinez has been the driving force behind the creation of several community programs, such as; the "Adopt a Neighborhood" program, where various community groups and neighbors work together to eradicate graffiti through neighborhood involvement; the "Downtown Electrical Box Mural" program, enlisting local artists to mentor at-risk youth, and the "Adopt a Mailbox" program, which is a partnership with the U.S. Postal Service. He was instrumental in developing the Graffiti Task force "Stop Graffiti Now" Facebook page. The goal of the website is to bring awareness, educate the community, seek community input and encourage volunteerism.

### **A Life Interrupted, History of the program:**

During 2002, Officer Don Cegielski of the Bakersfield Police Department was assigned to investigate fatal traffic collisions as part of his duties. On a cold winter night he was dispatched to southwest Bakersfield to investigate a fatal traffic collision. This collision involved a young male driver in a Honda Civic who was traveling in excess of 100 miles per hour when he rear ended a semi truck and trailer. As a result of the collision, the right rear passenger in the Honda suffered fatal injuries. The driver of the Honda was determined to be driving while under the influence and was arrested.

During the investigation, it was determined that the occupants of the Honda were all teenage boys. Prior to the collision, these young men had been at the driver's house where they were drinking alcoholic beverages. The three young men got into the Honda and were taking one of the passengers home when the collision occurred.

This unfortunate collision was one of several that occurred in the Bakersfield area involving teen drivers. By the end of the year, twelve local teens lost their lives due to motor vehicle collisions within the metropolitan area of Bakersfield.

These tragic events raised a couple of questions. First, what was being taught to our teen drivers with regard to driving responsibly; and second, what education was being provided to prevent alcohol and unsafe driving related crashes?

We learned that Driver's Education had been removed from the public schools due to cost and liability issues. Teen drivers were required to attend privately operated driving schools to learn how to drive. We were also beginning to see our first "Cool Parent" parties in the Bakersfield area. These are teen parties sponsored by parents who provide the alcohol. Representatives of MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) did not have a strong presence in our local high schools. Their programs were grant based and not available to every school during the school year.

The education of our teens, with regard to personal responsibility and wise choices, had been placed on the "back burner" due to cost. We needed to move this education to the front burner, and in a hurry.

Rather than continuing the status quo and watch more and more teens die in pointless accidents, we set out to create a venue to better educate our local teen drivers. Due to the difficulty in providing additional programming in local high schools, the officers knew their program had to be compact. They also were keenly aware that in order to capture the attention of teens, a high impact intense program was needed.

The idea behind the program was to use actual photographs from fatal collisions which occurred in the Bakersfield area. Officers from the California Highway Patrol and Officer Cegielski reviewed potential collisions looking for those involving teens that had died as a result of traffic collisions. The collisions did not necessarily involve driving under the influence; they also involved poor choices while in the act of driving. The officers then took the difficult step of approaching families to get permission to talk about their children and to use photos of the child from before the collision.

The program featured a multi-media presentation which included actual, and sometimes very graphic collision scene photos, as well as original 911 recordings. Background information on the collision and the victims was obtained which personalized each incident. Individual presentations featured one or more parents of a victim killed in a collision to relate the personal impact on the parent and the family. Local tow companies would donate their time and services by hauling one of the actual vehicles involved in one of the crashes. Though it was not used in every presentation, the program had an optional component which included drivers responsible for the death of another through their own irresponsible actions. One such driver spoke at several presentations as part of court ordered probation arranged by our department. The emphasis of our message was to **“Be Responsible for Your Actions.”**

Since its inception in 2002, presentations have continued year round. From 2002 to 2007, the program was presented over 200 times to more than 100,000 attendees at local junior high and high schools, businesses and various civic and youth groups. The program has been presented at the headquarters of the California Highway Patrol and the California Office of Traffic Safety. Since 2004, the program has been wholly funded and supported by the Bakersfield Police Department and the City of Bakersfield.

With the assistance of the local media and the Kern High School District, the program has been presented in every local high school in Kern County. We have been involved in producing public service announcements publicizing sober graduation during the spring season and have fostered strong working relationships with all local media.

**2008 – Making the Program Even Stronger:** Community support for the program has been amazing. In early 2008, a new Chevrolet truck was donated by Three-Way Chevrolet and a \$68,000 donation was given by State Farm Insurance to purchase a glass sided trailer used to display vehicles involved in featured collisions as well as video equipment with streaming video depicting safe driving messages and stories about the victims. This truck and trailer has been on display at numerous football games, high school presentations as well as numerous community events.

**The Results:** In the time period from 2002 to 2005, the number of drivers age 20 and under involved in alcohol related collisions in the Bakersfield Police Department jurisdictions dropped by 35%. This decrease did not happen immediately. We saw the most significant improvement from 2004 to 2005 where these types of injuries dropped by 50%. In 2007, we experienced one death of a teen as a result of a collision, a far cry from the 12 killed in 2002. By continuing to focus our efforts to our target audience, repeating our message and growing this program to actively involve young drivers, their parents, schools and businesses, we will accomplish our goal of decreasing vehicle collisions through responsible driving practices and saving the lives of young people in our community.

With the introduction of the DUI Crash Trailer Exhibit, more young drivers, parents and community members are able to learn how these crashes happened and how they can be prevented. Major supporters of the program include State Farm Insurance and Three-Way Chevrolet, but we have many other community supporters including W.A. Thompson, Klein Denatale and Goldner, Hall Ambulance, Barnett's Towing, Randy's Towing, Friday Night Live, AB Automation, American Society of Safety Engineers, Kern County Fire Department and the list grows daily.

This program is impactful because it is so personal to the audience. At every display or presentation, there is always someone in the audience who knows someone personally or indirectly who is mentioned in the program.

Nancy Chaffin, whose son died as a result of one of the collisions detailed in the program, makes presentations to teens as part of "A Life Interrupted." Chaffin says, "The program provides an impactful combination of the gruesome facts and the raw emotion of personal tragedy. It's a startling reminder that this can happen to anyone ---no one is immune." She continues, "There are no words that can express the devastation of losing a child. It leaves a hole in your heart that can never be filled. The love remains strong, but all your hopes and dreams for your child are gone in an instant, their potential never realized. "It's tremendously rewarding when someone comes up to us after a presentation to thank us and tell us they will never drink and drive or get in a car with someone who is impaired," she adds.

"A Life Interrupted" has won numerous awards including the 2008 Helen Putnam Award for Excellence by the League of California Cities.



Those depicted in the photo left to right are Vice President of CCPOA Northern Chapter Tim Truby, Detective Don Cegielski, and President of the A Life Interrupted non profit organization, Nancy Chaffin, Officer Danny Wells, Officer Rex Davenport and Captain Joe Bianco.