

Mother against drunk driving garners national award (5-12-21)

On the night of Jan. 29, 1998, Nancy Scharenbroich was driving home when an ambulance passed her.

She felt the need to follow it, and so she did. She came upon a car crash on the east side of Brandon. First responders gave her a description of the vehicle, and in that moment, she knew it was her son, Eric Scharenbroich, and his girlfriend, Angee Rozeboom.

Eric and Angee, who were 16 and 17, respectively, died instantly in the car crash.

The driver who caused the crash, 21-year-old Jared Schwebach, was drunk—testing at a 0.18 blood alcohol level. He was later sentenced to 30 years in prison.

“I remember every second of that night,” Scharenbroich said. “I remember screaming, ‘No, not me.’ I never signed up for anything; I never wanted to do this, but every step I took from that day on, I’ve been compelled to try and make people understand how tragic and senseless this is.”

From that night on, Scharenbroich has made it her mission to help as many people as possible—and to save as many lives as possible.

“My message was simple: Get a ride, don’t drink and drive,” Scharenbroich said.

Scharenbroich worked in the printing industry at the time, so she put her message on a poster and printed out 2,500 copies.

“My husband said, ‘What are you doing to do with all of those?’ Scharenbroich remembers. “And, I said, ‘I’m going to take them to every bar in South Dakota.’”

Her husband, however, suggested that she take them to the kids, and she did.

Scharenbroich began speaking to Brandon Valley students until she met a videographer who helped her and Angee’s mom, Jo Rozeboom, create a video of their stories so they wouldn’t have to speak each time.

“It was really hard those [first] 10 years, but it hasn’t gotten any easier, so I really depend on my video,” Scharenbroich said.

For the first decade following the accident, the determined mom spoke to thousands of students.

“I stopped counting at 18,000,” she said.

From there, she created a non-profit in 2002 called From the H.E.A.R.T (Help Eliminate Alcohol Related Tragedies).

Eventually, Scharenbroich’s ‘Get a Ride’ posters turned into bumper stickers, and her video—which included additional safety portions—began to play in DMVs across the state. She says over 120,000 people go through a DMV in the course of a year whether to renew their license or take their permit

test, so chances are, hundreds of thousands of people hear at least a piece of her message every year.

This, Scharenbroich says, also serves as a reminder to older individuals not to drink and drive.

“The parents that are sitting next to their child in the driver’s license office who are waiting to get their first license, and the pressure is on—not only the child but for the parent, too—to hear that message together,” Scharenbroich said.

Scharenbroich also received grants from the South Dakota Office of Highway Safety that allowed her to move her message to commercials, radio and billboards. She now has billboards in eight states and dreams of having one in every state.

“My billboards—I love them the best because they’re right there,” Scharenbroich said.

By 2015, she had distributed over 525,000 stickers and 130,000 keychains—all for free at schools, DMVs and rest stops.

But, From the H.E.A.R.T isn’t Scharenbroich’s day job and never has been. Ever since it began, this non-profit has been solely volunteerism.

And, it’s this determination and willingness to serve that led Scharenbroich to be one of 15 people to receive the 2021 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) Public Service Award.

The award was presented to Scharenbroich on April 28 out of Washington, D.C.—although the ceremony was held virtually. It was presented by NHTSA acting administrator Dr. Steven Cliff and U.S. Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg.

According to the NHTSA website, Scharenbroich was given the award for her “advocacy and commitment to impaired driving prevention through outreach and education in South Dakota.”

Despite the prestigious award, Scharenbroich says she simply wants her message of not drinking and driving to be heard and shared.

“My message is so simple, but you have to promise it for a lifetime, and you have to commit to it,” Scharenbroich said. “You’ll change your own life, and you’ll change someone else’s life. But there’s no reward—you’ll never know whose life you changed.”

“You’ll drive past each other, you’ll make it home safe and you’ll wake up the next morning, and you’ll never have to experience that tragedy,” she continued.

While the memories of Eric and Angee live on through Scharenbroich and everyone who strives to tell their stories, she wishes a different choice had been made that night.

“The kids had lots of plans for their lives,” Scharenbroich said. “That night, they were talking about what they were going to wear to prom.”

Although Scharenbroich now only speaks about once a year to a driver's ed class at O'Gorman High School, she says when she spoke more regularly, she always told students how they could change someone's life just by making a simple choice.

"But it has to be a lifetime choice to not get behind the wheel after they've been drinking because it's too hard to make that decision when you've been drinking," she said. "It's like, 'Oh, it's OK, I'll be fine,' and they think they'll be fine, but they don't realize how they hurt the other family members with their choices."

With her huge outreach, Scharenbroich says that, most of all, she wants to keep as many people out of her position as possible.

"You can't even fathom the horror of this, and I don't want people to know the horror of this," Scharenbroich said. "That's why I was compelled from that moment to change someone else's life, and I'll never know whose life I changed, but I'll know I tried my best to change someone's life."