

FROM PAGE 1A

FOWLER

That sort of scene plays out dozens of times every weekend at BRAKES, a free defensive-driving class for teenagers, where young drivers practice for exactly the kinds of situations most of them will never see until their life depends upon it.

BRAKES is the brainchild and passion of Charlottean Doug Herbert, a former champion drag racer who routinely drove cars 300 mph for a living.

Herbert knows speed. He loves speed. And he is very aware that speed helped cause the deaths of his two sons, ages 17 and 12, in a horrific car crash in Cornelius in 2008.

"It was a Saturday morning," Herbert says. "My older son, Jon, told James, 'Hop in the car with me. Let's go get a biscuit at McDonald's.' And they never came back."

Seven years later, Herbert relives those deaths every day for the benefit of others. He has told thousands of BRAKES students about his boys. Even now, when he tells the story or shows a video about the crash and its aftermath to an audience, he still sometimes cries. But he continues to exhibit pictures of the wreck because he believes "that's reality, and that helps teens understand."

In those pictures, taken by the Cornelius Police Department, the Mazda sports car that Jon and James were in appears as an impossibly twisted hunk of metal. It is nearly unrecognizable as a car.

The two deaths were Jon's fault. The Cornelius police report estimated that Jon was driving 80 mph in a 45-mph zone on Jetton Road when he lost control, skidded across four lanes of traffic and hit a Hummer. That vehicle's two passengers also were injured, but not seriously.

"We've all been teenagers before," Herbert says. "Jon was just driving too fast and too recklessly. He put other cars on the road in danger. I wish my younger son had said, 'Hey, let me out of the car. You're being dumb. I don't want to drive with you.' But kids don't do that. They don't want to embarrass themselves, to be called a chicken."

So Herbert got the call every parent dreads. He was in Phoenix, preparing for a drag race, when the phone rang.

Doug Herbert and the boys' mother, Sonnie Herbert, had divorced a couple of years before. The boys lived with their father except when he was out of town, so they were at their mother's home that morning. The two parents lived in different houses but in the same neighborhood, less than a mile from where the wreck occurred.

Herbert knew Jon had aggressive driving tendencies. He had counseled his son to slow down on the road and come with him to the drag strip when he wanted to drive fast. But he says he wishes he had done more.

"Parents are usually put into the role of driving instructor before they are really ready for it," Herbert says. "I know I was. Jon had a little bit of a tough situation. He would think about me racing this car going 300 mph, and he couldn't get his head around, 'Well, what's the big deal driving fast down the street? You drive a car that goes 300 mph. You're telling me I can't?'"

After mourning his sons' deaths and learning more about the thousands of teens killed every year in driving accidents, Herbert decided to do something about it.

'MOST TEENAGERS THINK THEY KNOW EVERYTHING'

Fatal crashes involving teenage drivers are such a big problem that they are routinely studied by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, a federal agency. The CDC's most recent numbers, from 2013, show that 2,163 teens died in car crashes in the U.S. that year.

That's about six teenagers dying in wrecks every single day in America.

Six families, every day, getting the news that Herbert's family did.

Cars have become much safer over the years. All 50 states now have some form of graduated driver's licenses, which means teenagers earn unrestricted driving privileges more slowly than their parents once did.

But auto fatalities remain the

No. 1 thing killing our teenagers. Nothing else is even close.

Take the numbers of deaths caused by every type of disease or illness a teenager can have in a year. Add all of those numbers together. Only then do you get a number similar to the thousands of deaths every year sustained by teenagers in car crashes.

"Teenagers tend to be a very healthy group," says Dr. Ruth Shults, a senior epidemiologist with the CDC who specializes in teen driving. "So when they die, it is usually due to some sort of injury. ... And in a dangerous situation on the road, they tend to overreact."

Herbert, now 47, didn't know any of those statistics when his oldest son began driving. But he and the small staff at BRAKES, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, have them all at their fingertips now. They know, for instance, that 50 percent of new drivers have some sort of accident within their first month of driving.

"Most teenagers think they know everything," Herbert says. "We try to teach them that they don't."

THE 'SAVING LIVES' BUSINESS

"Benjamin ... controlled a triple spin on an overpass after being T-boned at an intersection. By all witness accounts, Benjamin's car should have gone off the overpass and crashed onto the freeway with four fatalities. Thanks to BRAKES training, 4 teens left the accident and went on to basketball practice with just an adrenaline rush. THANK YOU BRAKES AND THANK YOU GOD!"

— Michelle Dhami, mother of a BRAKES student, in a letter

BRAKES got its name from students at SouthLake Christian Academy in Huntersville. Herbert's two sons had gone to school there (his daughter still does). After Jon and James died in the 2008 crash, he came to talk with some of his older son's classmates.

"I got all the seniors together, who were Jon's buddies," Herbert says. "And I told them I wanted to do something to help teach guys like you about driving safe. I need your help in coming up with a name for an advanced driving program that teaches teenagers how to avoid accidents."

The next week Herbert visited again and the students had come up with the name BRAKES. It was an acronym standing for "Be Responsible And Keep Everyone Safe." The organization has used it since.

BRAKES taught 50 students in 2008, its first year. In 2015, it will teach 5,000.

The program has been so well-received and has grown so rapidly that Col. Bill Grey, commander of the N.C. Highway Patrol, has allowed BRAKES to use the Highway Patrol's 300-acre training academy in Raleigh for free when it holds its classes there.

"We don't let anybody outside of law enforcement use the facility except for BRAKES," Grey says.

"I truly feel that Doug's program is making a difference in that respect."

DEATHS 'LIKE A SHARP STICK POKING YOU'

I have attended two different four-hour BRAKES classes – first as the parent of a new 16-year-old driver, then nine months later as a reporter. Both started exactly the same way.

First, the students arrive, looking somewhat sleepy and each towing along a parent (a requirement of the class). They all are required to already have their driver's license or a learner's



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BRAKES instructor Ricardo Rodriguez, second from right, talks to teens before they get into their cars.

5 tips for teen drivers

1. Wear your seat belt. Nothing keeps you safer. Other than a well-trained driver, it is the most important safety feature inside any car.
2. When driving, keep your hands at a "9 and 3" position on a clock rather than the "10 and 2" position your parents were taught. If the airbag deploys, you are much less likely to break your arms.
3. Adjust your side-view mirrors outward so that you don't see the side of your own vehicle. This can practically eliminate the "blind spot."
4. Don't over-correct. No one says you have to get back on the road as fast as you ran off it.
5. Pay full attention when you are driving and look way ahead. A car can be a weapon. Texting must wait. Your phone should be well out of view so you are not tempted to take a quick glance.

5 tips for parents of teen drivers

1. Once your teenager starts driving, make them drive you everywhere when the two of you are the only ones in the car. "Parents, consider your own license revoked," says Col. Bill Grey, head of the N.C. Highway Patrol. "There is no substitute for experience and for having someone guide you through a tough situation."
2. Even after your teenager gets a license, your coaching job is not done. Ride with them as frequently as possible.
3. Print out a driving contract (many exist on the Internet) and have you and your teen sign it to ensure everyone is clear on the house's driving rules.
4. The safest way to start a new driver out is to have them share the family car, which is usually newer and has more safety features. If you do feel like you must buy your teenager a car, spend as much on safety as you can possibly afford.
5. Model good behavior: Always wear your own seat belt. Never text while driving.

For more information

To sign up your teen for a free four-hour BRAKES class or for more information on Doug Herbert's program, go to PutOnTheBrakes.org. Classes are usually offered about once a month in the Charlotte area and require a parent or guardian to attend along with the teenager. There is frequently a waiting list. A deposit of \$99 is required to hold a spot but is refundable after the class concludes.

permit. They also are required to have had at least 30 hours of experience behind the wheel already in a class that tries to give the sort of hands-on crisis experience that a standard driver's education class does not.

The classes are always held on Saturdays and Sundays. They are free, but you have to pay a deposit of \$99 to hold your spot and to "give the parents some skin in the game," as Herbert says. At the end of the class, anyone who wants the \$99 deposit back can have it. Most choose to donate it to the program.

BRAKES classes are held on closed courses and run about once a month at the zMax Dragway in Concord. They generally have a waiting list. Classes are also held regularly in Raleigh and California (where Herbert is

from) and occasionally in places such as Boston, Colorado and Alaska.

Once the students have slouched into their chairs – most looking disgruntled that their parents are nearby – a video is shown. It is a piece that NBC News once did on Herbert and his sons' deaths. It grabs everyone's attention quickly.

Doug Herbert, meanwhile, walks into the back of the room after everyone is seated and hides out for a few minutes. He tries to think about something else. He purposely avoids watching the video by messing with his phone. He doesn't want to see the deaths on TV any more than he has to.

"It's like a sharp stick poking you," Herbert says. "And after a while – well, it's still a sharp

stick, but it's gotten a little bit duller because it has poked you so many times."

After the video ends, the room hushes. Herbert walks to the front and introduces himself. He and the other BRAKES instructors quickly go through some of the more sobering statistics about new drivers, including the fact that 9 out of 10 of them have some sort of crash in their first three years of driving.

That's the first hour. Then the fun part starts.

DON'T PUMP BRAKES; SLAM THEM DOWN

The students and parents are split into two groups, with the students immediately going with the professional instructors (some are volunteers, some are paid) out onto the course. Using a fleet of cars donated to BRAKES by Kia, they get to practice what to do when a car skids. They purposely drive off the road and slowly ease back onto it. They try to avoid accidents on a slalom course.

They do a "Panic Stop," driving as fast as they can, then slamming the brakes and whipping the wheel. (Pumping the brakes, incidentally, is an incorrect lesson from decades ago that the BRAKES staff tries to erase from the heads of the parents – who get to drive the course, too, if they want.)

Stacey Dean, a 17-year-old high school senior from Raleigh, came to Concord with her mother to take the class in August.

"It was way more exciting than I thought it would be," Dean says. "It was really cool when you could make the car squeal by slamming on the brakes and swerving – that part sounded a lot like a movie. And I do feel more confident that when I get into that moment of shock or panic that I can stay a little calmer and react better."

GIVE YOUR KIDS ONE 'HALL PASS'

"My son took the BRAKES course in August 2015. In late September, he was going 70 mph on I-485 in Charlotte when the car totally lost power. Because his mirrors were positioned correctly due to the BRAKES instruction, he was able to quickly make sure he could get onto the shoulder. He didn't panic. I just think the training gave him the confidence to handle what could have been a really bad situation."

— Tim Burgess, Charlotte

There are lots of defensive driving courses out there. Herbert encourages everyone to make their teenager take one of them.

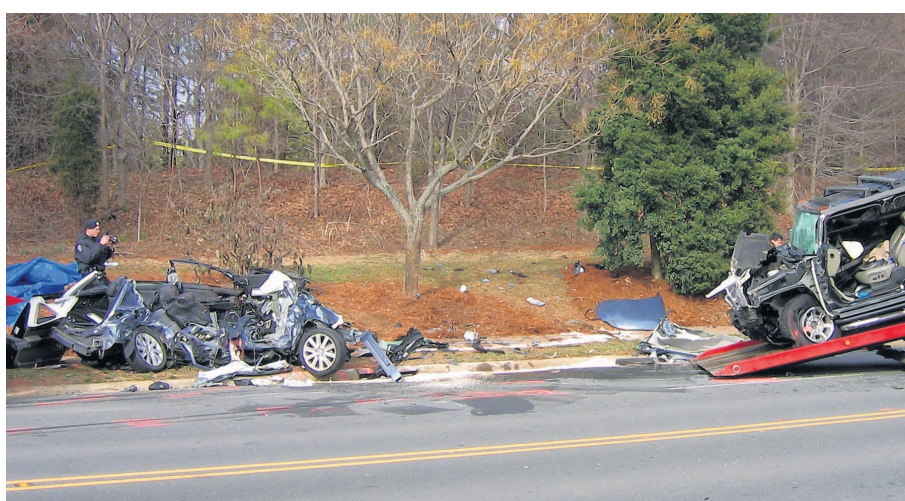
And, Herbert says, you have to be a mentor sometimes and not a hard-charging parent.

"At the end of the class," Herbert says, "we ask parents to give the kids one hall pass. Let them call you once and say, 'Hey, in a bad spot, come and get me.' And there are no consequences."

"The problem with saying you are going to rip them apart after a mistake," Herbert continues, "is that they're not going to call you then and tell you about the mistake. Be a mentor for a minute, not just a parent. There are a lot worse things than having to go pick a kid up from somewhere after they made a bad decision."

"Shoot, I'd go get my boys a million times – if I had the chance."

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TRACY YOCHUM Observer file photo