



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Terrence Murphy

Mahopac H.S. Grad Grabs The Wheel To Help Prevent Accidents Caused By Distracted Driving

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Mahopac, NY - According to statistics compiled by the Department of Transportation, 37,461 lives were lost on U.S. roads in 2016, an increase of 5.6% from 2015. Of this total, 3,450 were attributed to distracted driving deaths. Studies show that young drivers under age 20 are not only texters, they are also responsible for more than 58% of teen crashes and comprise up to 27% of the drivers in fatal crashes caused by distracted driving.

When Alexandria Conlin, a recent Mahopac High School graduate, read these statistics she became determined to find a way to influence her peers to drive safe and distraction free.

Conlin contacted Senator Terrence Murphy to talk with him about developing an awareness campaign. Enlisting the help of Senator Murphy, Assemblyman Kevin Byrne, Chief Michael Cazarri of the Carmel Police Department, and Mahopac High School teacher and Driver's Education Instructor Michael Douma, Conlin created an awareness campaign entitled "Be Distraction Free - Behind the Wheel."

"As a relatively new driver, I am very aware of people driving when they are distracted, particularly while texting," said Conlin. "My generation and even older generations are very dependent on their smartphones. Good habits need to be developed now that will keep phones from distracting drivers while they are behind the wheel. Just taking your eyes off the road for a few seconds could change your life and other people's lives forever. Accidents can be prevented if everyone would just

focus on their driving. Whatever it is, it can wait."

"We need to keep our hands off the phone and on the wheel," said Senator Murphy. "Statistics show there are more distracted driving accidents than accidents involving drunk driving. Alexandria did a great job in creating a program that will not only reach adults but parents and seniors as well. At the end of the day, this is about saving lives."

Assemblyman Kevin Byrne spoke to Conlin about the dangers of distracted driving and how it had affected him personally. The night after he received the endorsement to run for the Assembly, he was involved in a horrific head-on collision caused by a distracted driver. Thankfully, the Assemblyman's injuries were not life-threatening.

"Distracted driving, whether it be from lack of sleep, texting, or checking social media on your phone, is quickly becoming one of the biggest contributors to auto accidents in the country," said Assemblyman Byrne. "We need to give law enforcement the tools they need to enforce the law, and we must do our best to ensure drivers understand 'hands off the phone, hands on the wheel, and eyes on the road!'"

Michael Cazzari, Carmel Chief of Police stated, "Young people need to realize taking their eyes off the road for just a few seconds to answer a text could cost them their lives."

Mahopac High School teacher and Driver's Ed instructor Michael Douma has an equally succinct message for drivers: "Put your phone away and live to see another day."

Conlin worked on the program as part of her Girl Scout Gold Award for Driver Awareness. Chief Cazzari supplied Conlin with statistics on the number of accidents over the past two years and the number of people pulled over while using their phones.

The Driver's Ed program at Mahopac High School agreed to let Conlin give students pledge cards at the beginning of their program. The students will also fill out a survey at the end of their program. Conlin is also distributing bookmarks, posters, brochures, pledge cards, and surveys to local Driver's Ed programs and libraries to

promote her campaign.

While conducting her research, Conlin learned that Evan Lieberman, a New Castle teenager, had lost his life due to a distracted driving accident in Westchester County. Lieberman's death prompted Senator Murphy to sponsor Senate Bill S6325A, "Evan's Law," which would provide a method for field testing mobile telephones and portable electronic devices after an accident or collision. The bill would be the first in the nation of its kind. A second bill sponsored by Senator Murphy, S8467, would give police and district attorneys the right to request the cell phone records of drivers involved in accidents. Unfortunately, the bills did not pass. Variations of these bills may be reintroduced in January or future legislation may focus more on distracted driving.

One bill, S478B, sponsored by Senator Jose Peralta was signed into law Sept 13, 2017. The bill allows the New York City Department of Transportation to study and report on its efforts to educate pedestrians and drivers about the dangers of pedestrians being distracted by mobile devices.