

## The quick and the dead

**Cars and testosterone can be a lethal combination, a fact to which accident statistics bear grim testimony. Mary Hampshire reports on a hard-hitting initiative aimed at teaching young drivers to respect the road**

**May 30th 1997**

**The Times Educational Supplement**

He has heard the chilling sound of a man being raped, seen an inmate slashed in a shower with a razor blade, and a prisoner "snooker-balled" in the face. Yet 25-year-old Peter, serving time at Sudbury Open Prison for causing death by careless driving, tells students at High Peak College: "Prison is the safest place for me at the moment."

It is his first presentation as part of the hard-hitting Young Driver Education Project. Launched by Derbyshire police, it aims to educate young people in schools and colleges across the county about responsible driving habits because their age group is always prominent in accident statistics.

This year approximately 12 schools and colleges will be visited by a team led by road traffic officer Sgt Andy Peck. At High Peak College, 200 students are attending a day-long project, which is divided into four workshops examining the law relating to driving, breathalyser tests, speeding devices, and the Road Traffic Act, and involving discussions stimulated by video films and a role-play game. But it's key element is the real-life stories told by people affected by road tragedies.

Dressed in a tracksuit and trainers, Peter, a former civil engineer, perches on the edge of a table at the front of a mobile classroom and talks about how his life has been affected by the death of the cyclist he killed four years ago, when he was over the alcohol limit. His voice falters as he explains nervously: "Everyone suffers. My little sister has been slagged off: people have told her I'm a murderer. My mum and dad have been verbally abused. Bottles have been thrown at my friends, and my wife has been beaten up. "The hardest thing I'm going to have to do," adds Peter, to his hushed and stoney-faced audience of 16 and 17-year-olds, "is face the mother, father, girlfriend and little boy of that person when I get out. I'm not going to tell you not to drink and drive. That's up to you. But I still wake up crying. I can't come to terms with what I've done. I've got a sentence for the rest of my life. I hope it never happens to any of you."

The risk of being involved in a fatal or serious accident, nationally, is approximately six times higher for 17 to 20-year-olds than for over-40s. While drink-driving accounts for some of the deaths in Derbyshire, the majority of drivers and passengers die as a result of speeding. Sgt Peck started the Young Driver Education Project in 1995 after the number of accidents in the High Peak

and Derbyshire Dales road traffic division overtook the national average. Although there are no motorways or dual carriageways in that area, it accounts for half of the county's road deaths every year. Of the 20 names on the fatality list for 1995 and 1996, all except one are young men.

Reciting accident statistics does little to change behaviour, but shock tactics tend to leave a more indelible impression. "If you start talking accident statistics and reams of figures, people just switch off," says Sgt Peck, who on an average of once every two and a half weeks has the unenviable task of informing families they have been bereaved.

They have included the family of Mark Thomasson, aged 18, who studied at High Peak College. His mum, Erica, joined the project along with two other mothers, to talk about the emotional devastation wreaked by road accidents. She puts on a brave face, sighs, then takes a deep breath and shows the class a picture of Mark smiling on holiday. People start to shift uncomfortably in their seats. Mark's face is recognised by two students who used to visit the local swimming baths in Glossop where he worked. "Mark's dad repeatedly warned him that driving a car was like being in charge of a lethal weapon," she says, clutching a tissue. "My last words to him were, 'You take care driving that car'. He said, 'I will. See you later'."

Mark died on July 9, 1995. He was racing a friend at 80mph on a residential street in his Vauxhall Nova but lost control and somersaulted on a bend as he tried to overtake. Last October his friend was found guilty of causing death by dangerous driving. Erica continues: "We rushed to the scene. It was utter carnage. We couldn't see Mark, but we knew he was dead, upside down in his car. My other son had to sit down from the shock, and my husband was on his knees on the pavement sobbing his heart out. How would you like it to be your mum or dad sitting here?"

Young men, Sgt Peck points out to the group of seven male and three female students, are particularly vulnerable to the excitement and macho status associated with driving cars fast. Many young men, he says, are egged on to drive to the pub or take their friends out when they have just passed their test. They think they are immortal, but inexperience on the roads, adrenaline and peer pressure are a lethal combination. "Everybody speeds. It's so easy to do. There's a stigma about drink-driving, but all the accident figures show that only a small percentage who cause road deaths are over the limit. Most of those at the wheel are stone-cold sober. "

John Cooper, aged 17, was killed 18 months ago when the car he was driving collided with a tractor. He had just dropped off his girlfriend after a sixth-form ball. Students are shown some of the footage of his accident, with sirens blaring at the scene, on the road he had driven down 22 times before. His mother, Gwyneth, shows the class a gilt-framed photograph of John, who was studying for his A-

levels, with his girlfriend, Vicki. "I still open the curtains in his room every morning and close them at night," she says. "I wait to hear his stereo blare out. When I go to the supermarket I realise I cannot buy his favourite food any more because no one else eats it. Believe you me, the pain stays with you every minute of every single day. It never goes away."

Sue Bagshaw's son, Lee, died in May 1995 two days after his 20th birthday and two days after buying his dream car, a Vauxhall Nova SRI. He was speeding at 80mph. His passenger survived, as did the occupants of the car he collided with. "There could have been three dead that day," says Sue. "My family is like a jigsaw with a piece missing. Just remember, these young men had so much to live for. Please, please take care."