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Student actors from Red Mountain High School in Mesa used as real-life props at mock vehicle accident



Mesa Fire and Medical Department officials cut away and remove the doors of a vehicle in a mock-crash demonstration March 7 before 3,300 students at Red Mountain High School. Photo by Richard H. Dyer, Independent

Newsmedia Inc. USA.

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Sounds were muffled, but Savvana Wolverton, a junior at [Red Mountain High School](#), could make out what was happening at a mock vehicle-accident reenactment held at the football field.

As more than 3,000 students filed into the football stadium stands the morning of Thursday, March 7, she kept still under a blue tarp, sipping with a straw from a water bottle to stay hydrated.

When the program started, the tarp was removed and she was face down on the grass with arms sprawled as if she had been ejected from a nearby vehicle.

An announcer explained in a radio call for help that an SUV had been in an accident and there were four or five patients; the others were in the vehicle.

[Mesa Fire and Medical Department](#) paramedics and [Mesa Police](#) were contacted and soon arrived. They checked the victims, used extrication tools to open doors and eventually removed the top of the vehicle. The student-actor driver, who was pretending to be under the influence of drugs or alcohol in the mock fatal accident, was shown being questioned by police and was later led away in handcuffs.

Officials checked for Savvana's pulse and said she had died. She was covered again, but this time with a blanket. She was later moved by medical examiner personnel, zipped into a body bag and transported on a wheeled gurney to a waiting vehicle.

"It was fun. I heard a lot going on, but getting in the body bag, actually, was really exciting. I mean, I was conscious of what was going on, but – hey, this is where dead people go. It's just an interesting thought. Kind of morbid, but it was cozy," Savvana said.

She feels different about the responsibilities of driving after the event.

"Yeah, be more responsible when I drive - much more responsible. This makes me think twice about it. A lot of people don't realize how severe it could be," she said.

The reenactment was held two days before spring break by design, officials said.

"Especially going into spring break, where kids tend to not make the best decisions, sometimes this will help support not only driving safe but then also not drinking and driving or doing any illegal items that might make them impaired," School Resource Officer Karrie Flanahan, of the Mesa Police Department, said. "Hopefully it will send a good message to everybody."

Jack Costello, of Liberty Mutual and a 1997 graduate of Red Mountain High School, 7301 E. Brown Road, said he initiated the project, which was coordinated by Mesa Fire and Medical Department and other officials.

"This is not going to just change the lives of the 3,300 kids who are going to be here. Their little eighth-grade brothers and sisters – they're going to know about this," Mr. Costello said prior to the reenactment. "This is not just going to change the driving habits of speeding, but this is going to change the driving habits of kids who maybe are drinking and driving and who will say 'Hey, I don't want to be part of the statistic. I don't want to be one of those kids.' I just think

we are going to help save lives for, at least, the next three to four years.”

Red Mountain High School Principal Gerald Slemmer said the event went very well and built on safety education already taught in the school.

“We’ve got 3,300 kids here. You talk to them about drinking and driving and you talk to them about text messaging and not driving – we cover that all in our driver-education classes and then some,” he said. “But it’s the age-old attitude of ‘Hey, this isn’t going to happen to me’ and that’s what’s dangerous – to believe you’re invincible and something like this won’t happen to you. So, having a program like this, this morning, if it gets students to think when they get into a car with other students, which they certainly are going to do... If they’ll think about putting their seatbelt on and think about not text messaging and if there is a little shock-value from this, then fine – that’s what we’re hoping will take place. It might save a life; who knows?”

Student actors

The victims in the mock accident were all students from the high school.

Kay Townsend, of the Mesa Community College Theater Department, who teaches stage makeup and other theater courses, produced the scars, bruises, scratches and cuts on the actors. The makeup was applied first outside, next to the stadium track, and then in the girls’ locker room.

As she used stage blood and painted bruises on Savvana, Ms. Townsend explained it with “you’re dead; you were ejected, probably broke your neck.”

Mason Thorman, a RMHS senior, acted as the driver. He was taken out of the vehicle on a stretcher and later was shown taking a field sobriety test, failing, and then being put into handcuffs and being transported from the field in a Mesa Police vehicle.

“I know that drinking and everything like that is a real big problem in high school so I just want to make it known that if you are going to drink - and make the mistake to drive - to not do it,” Mason said before the event.

McKenzie Trimble, a senior, acted as a passenger – “just to use my leadership as a role model to not make poor decisions,” she said when asked why she was helping.

Gilbert Rubio, a senior, acted as a backseat passenger. Ms. Townsend applied a raised scar over his left eye.

“It’s exciting, but yet serious, because you start to think about, ‘What if I actually had this wound?’ and how crazy seeing other people like dead would really shock other students. It would be like an eye-opener,” Gilbert said before the event. “Just being a part of this, it’s going to be, I don’t want to be on this side of it ever. I don’t want it to be real. I’m glad I got picked. Scary, but fun,” he said.

J.T. Rodenkirch, a junior, acted as a backseat passenger. “It’s more realistic than I thought it would be,” he said before the event. “It hits home because I knew a guy who got into a car accident and died when he was 16, in high school, so it makes it that much more real for me. I’m just excited and glad that I could help.”

Mesa Fire Department’s Jean DeStories prepared the student actors by giving them tips on how to act and asked them to keep the makeup on throughout the day when talking to their peers.

Capt. Forrest Smith, public information officer for the Mesa Fire and Medical Department, was the initial announcer at the reenactment, explaining to the student audience what happened and who was arriving on scene. He also met with the actors before the event.

Shari Herrin, an R.N. at Cardon Children’s Hospital, spoke to the students in the stands during the reenactment on what happens at an accident and when a patient is brought to the hospital for treatment. She also briefed the actors prior to

the event.

“It’s going to be more intense than they actually had the feeling,” she said of the actors. “Their emotions are going to kick in very, very strong, so we like to brief them very well to kind of know what is going to happen, she said.

City officials put motivational posters in the stadium’s stands, asking them to Tweet about it with #RMHSMockCrash.

In addition to Mesa Fire and Medical Department and Police officials, a Southwest Ambulance and personnel were used, a medical helicopter landed on the field and three medical examiners prepared actress Savvana for removal from the scene.

Jim Taft, Robroy Beattie and owner Christina Duwel of At Seasons Mortuary in Apache Junction wore dark shirts with “Medical Examiner” and “Pinal County” on them. As fire and police officials handled other parts of the reenactment on the field, they carefully placed Savvana in an orange body bag, then onto a wheeled stretcher and took her to a van.

Ms. Duwel explained that she worked for Mesa Fire Department before becoming a mortician and contracts with Pinal County to do medical-examiner transports.

“Ever see kids pay more attention to something?” Mr. Beattie asked.

He has been to previous mock-accident events and said there is a point in every one where the students get quiet and begin to understand the gravity of the situation.

“It always takes a little because, first of all, they have to look at everybody and decide, ‘Well wait a minute. Do I know her from third hour?’ Once it sinks in, then they start going, ‘Woah. Wait a minute. This looks so real,’” he said after the reenactment. “And that’s when it starts sinking in, that’s when they start looking at each other, all their phones come out and they start recording us. And when they see that little girl getting into the orange bag, that seems to tell them ‘Hey. Wake up. Stop. Stop. Just stop.’”

Maricopa resident Travis Ferreira, a driver for Coyote Towing, explained that the vehicle used in the reenactment was from a used salvage yard in Phoenix and that he would be taking it back there.

A mock crash is very informative for the students, he said.

“It certainly serves as a wake-up call to all of the kids who currently have licenses and drive, teaches them to be responsible behind the wheel,” he said.

He was worked at numerous serious accidents.

“I’ve picked up many cars. I originally moved here from Boston and I did a lot of accidents, a lot of fatal accidents, one of which was a very important school friend of mine. About four years ago she was driving drunk and she smashed her car on the highway,” Mr. Ferreira said. “Like I said, this is a good demonstration to prevent all this from ever happening, from young people getting in any accidents on the road.”

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