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ARDEN - Chirping cell phones, rowdy friends, thumping stereo systems, other drivers: Calculating behind-the-wheel distractions offers an algebra problem challenging to even the smartest high school student.

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But the equations aren't solved in the classroom these days. Instead, the test is in real life, one taken on roads and highways where teenagers are disproportionately killed in vehicle crashes.

One Arden 17-year-old - Katrina Ponder - wants to help her peers think and act differently behind the wheel.

Ponder is one of 46 U.S. teens leading the first year of the Keep the Drive program, a 10-year effort sponsored by The Allstate Foundation that encourages

teens - regardless of their insurer - to talk to one another about being smarter drivers. The National Transportation Safety Administration says vehicle crashes are the No. 1 killer of 15- to 20-year-olds.

"People care, but they don't think it can happen to them," the West Henderson High School senior said. "Teenagers especially have that whole invincible attitude. They think, 'It will happen, but it won't happen to me.'"

But, said Susan Duchak, director of the foundation's teen driving program, the numbers show it's happening all too often. It's a public health problem, she said, that deserves community action.

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety found that in 2005, more than 5,200 teenagers died in motor vehicle crashes. In 1995, the number was more than 5,600.

"It's a statistic that hasn't changed much in the last 10 years," Duchak said. And it means up to 16 teens die every day, on average, from these accidents.

"If that were some sort of disease (causing those deaths)," she said, "you can bet there would be some sort of public reaction."

One reaction is through graduated drivers license programs, which have improved teen skills.

But behaviors and attitudes still have a way to go, Duchak said.

A 2005 national survey by the foundation found nearly half of teens said their friends hold significant sway on how they drive. It also found:

- Teens feel it's OK to go over the speed limit and that the only danger is being caught by the police. Twenty-six percent said they speed by more than 20 miles an hour above the limit.
- Thirteen percent write and/or read text messages while driving.
- And more than half make and answer phone calls while driving.

Duchak said teenagers like Ponder must be involved in finding solutions to vehicle-related death among their peers. Ponder said she plans to work the Web to spread a smart-driving message.

And, Duchak said, the problem needs to be looked at as a health care and a parenting issue.

Ponder's mother, Pam Sharpton, said the program urges parents to understand the risk their children take behind the wheel.

"Katrina has had probably about six friends involved in very serious car accidents throughout her high school career - four years worth," Sharpton said. "I think that's appalling numbers. I think about half are lucky to be here at all.

"We hear about this everyday and we know people involved in accidents and it just



credit: BILL SANDERS, WSANDERS@CITIZEN-TIMES.COM

Arden 17-year-old Katrina Ponder is one of 46 U.S. teens leading an effort by The Allstate Foundation called Keep the Drive, a program working to change teenagers' attitudes and behaviors behind the wheel. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety says teenagers drive less than all but the oldest people, but their numbers of crashes and crash deaths are disproportionately high.

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- On MySpace: www.myspace.com/keepthedrive.
- The Allstate Foundation: www.allstate.com/community.

Thanksgiving is one of the deadliest days for teen drivers. Others include Fourth of July, New Year's Eve and the 100 days between Memorial Day and Labor Day, according to Keep the Drive, a program of The Allstate Foundation, aiming to reduce the numbers of teens killed in vehicle accidents.

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scares the wits out of you."

It's been a wakeup call, she said.

And it's been a wakeup call for her daughter, who was involved in an accident herself, nearly two months ago. Another teenager swiped her car on a Henderson County road. No one was hurt, Ponder said.

"Used to, I was guilty of messing with the radio and now I think about it more, pay attention to my surroundings," she said, "especially if I'm in the car with someone else, people have a tendency to be rowdy. I try not to do that - distract people - and I try not to pay attention to distractions myself.

"Just seeing all of those accidents happen just really made me think about it."



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