

December 7, 2012

**Mourning with a message**  
**10 years after son's death, mother continues to stress safe teen driving**  
*JONATHAN STANKIEWICZ*

Chronicle Staff Writer

COVENTRY - Ryan Ramirez would have turned 29 years old last month.

Killed in a car accident 10 years ago today, Ramirez, then 19, was a passenger in an accident in Hebron.

A 2001 graduate of Windham Technical High School, Ramirez worked as an apprentice electrician for over a year before the accident.

The 18-year-old driver of the car was arrested on numerous charges and, ultimately, sent to prison.

Ramirez was one of five teenagers killed, in three accidents, during an 11-day period in December 2002.

Ramirez's mother, Sherry Chapman of Coventry, along with two other mothers, found a common theme among the accidents.

All three crashes involved teenage drivers, who were inexperienced, carrying passengers and were speeding.

Chapman and the other mothers who lost loved ones decided to band together to form Mourning Parents Act Inc., or !MPACT, to help promote better driving habits among teens.

Making free presentations in schools and wherever they are able, ! MPACT, over the last 10 years, has grown, but carries the same messages.

"What we do is share, we don't just talk," Chapman said, adding the group of presenters has grown to eight speakers.

"We aren't just moms and dads anymore."

Chapman said the group, which speaks to thousands of teens each year, now includes a young man who was a driver in an accident that killed his best friend and a young woman who was involved in a "horrific crash" that left her with a traumatic brain injury.

" We've really broadened to include anyone who's been impacted," she said. "I think that an audience doesn't relate to one speaker, so we've adapted to make sure we impact each and every teenager."

To aid !MPACT, Gov. Dannel P. Malloy, and Gov. M. Jodi Rell before him, designated this week, Dec. 2 to Dec. 8, as Safe Teen Driving Awareness Week across the state.

Chapman said teens get a "very, very personal message" from each presenter.

"For some reason we get into their hearts," she said. "Once we are in their hearts, then they are willing to listen to the statistics, willing to listen to what they can do to ensure their own safety."

To get that message across, Chapman and the others let the teens "get to know our kids."

"Dying in a car crash is a very, very violent death," she said, adding memorial videos and pictures do the trick to get teens to listen. " The visuals really draw them in."

Ten years since the founding of !MPACT, Chapman said the relationships she's built are " a huge benefit."

" No one understands us, but us," she said. "We are all very close. With a certain look, we can tell what someone's thinking."

With an emphasis on distracted driving by teens, Chapman said it doesn't take much to get their point across.

"Cars are a 3,000-pound weapon," she said. "It's not a pretty way to die."

Chapman said ! MPACT has and will continue to expand, even across state lines.

"We are now into Massachusetts and New Hampshire," she said, adding even more people are interested throughout New England. "I know we are saving kids' lives. It has worked and we will continue to spread our message."

Things haven't changed much as motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of death for U.S. teens, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In 2010, seven teens, ages 16 to 19, died every day from motor vehicle injuries, according to the CDC.

Local police departments say they are on top of the trends.

"Our officers look for distracted driving with a focus on teens," Coventry Police Chief Mark Palmer said. "We do a lot of work in the area in public safety education."

Palmer said the department's goal isn't to give out tickets though.

"We want to have everyone comply with the laws and be safe, especially with younger drivers who may be inexperienced," he said, adding teens don't have the experience, at times, to be safe drivers.

Willimantic Police Lt. Raymond Evans agreed.

"We want everyone to drive safely," he said. "In talking with kids, we've found that they are more aware of their driving skills now."

Evans said the department focuses on "selective enforcement" on teen drivers, for their own safety.

"If we see a trend we do focus on it," he said.

Natchaug Hospital Director of Ambulatory Services Dr. Carrie Piche, also a clinical psychologist, said safe teen driving starts with parents.

"Parents need to set those good examples," she said. "Kids will think and act just like how their parents act."

Pichie said it's also "not a onetime dialogue," either.

"You really need to talk, for a period of time, before, during and after the permit process," she said, adding it's a " continuous conversation. Teens need to take responsibility for that vehicle and their own life, including the others on the road."

Chapman said 10 years is a "shockingly long time" for her.

"It's more than half of Ryan's life," she said. "I am a sadder version of myself today. There will always be a big gaping hole in our family."

Chapman said, even at 19, Ramirez knew how many children he was going to have.

"It would have been nice to have been blessed with those children," she said.

For more information or to contact Chapman and the other speakers visit !MPACT's web site at [www.mourningparentsact.org](http://www.mourningparentsact.org).