

VOLUME 147 NUMBER 2

www.americanfuneraldirector.com

# A M E R I C A N Funeral Director

February 2024

*Every  
Minute,  
Every  
Life*

AMERICAN FUNERAL DIRECTOR

FEBRUARY 2024



# COVER STORY

By Patti Martin Bartsche



## Every Minute, Every Life

### *Every 15 minutes.*

It's a number the California Highway Patrol first talked about in 1990, referencing the frequency of traffic-related deaths nationwide.

The number would go on to become the genesis of the now nationwide in-school teen drinking and prevention program started by the CHP to combat the number of teens being killed or injured as a result of alcohol- or drug-related traffic crashes.

On Oct. 3, a team from two Musgrove Mortuaries & Cemeteries locations participated in an "Every 15 Minutes" event at Creswell High School in Creswell, Oregon. The event marked the fifth time that funeral directors Deanna "Dee" Harbison, location leader at Springfield Memorial Gardens & Funeral Home, and Randy Van Leuven, director of operations, represented last responders in partnership with the Lane County Sheriff's Office and local fire departments.

For Harbison, participating in the program is both professional and personal.

"We have a unique relationship with our Lane County Sheriff's Department. It started back some years ago when they needed some help with their Honor Guard program, and it's just grown from there," she said. "So, when they reached out to ask if we would like to be a part of the 'Every 15 Minutes' program, I immediately committed to be a part of it as a Last Responder."

Harbison's reaction was rooted in personal experience. "I graduated from high school in 1990. A couple weeks before our graduation we unfortunately fell into the statistics of the 'Every 15 Minutes' program," she explained. "We lost classmates; I know first-hand the devastation this can have on a family, friends, and community.

"Our graduation should have been a joyous occasion for us; instead, it was bittersweet," Harbison added. "So, if we can be involved in a program that is so meaningful, and if we can get just one person to stop and think before they do something, that's all that matters."

Before the actual event, students were pre-selected to participate to play various roles with parent/guardian permission required.

"In order to ensure the program's success, it is important that the families of these students be involved in the program as well," the Lane County Sheriff's Office explained. "This begins weeks prior to the event when parents or guardians of our involved students are encouraged to speak to their students about the impacts of choices they make and how to handle rough situations they may encounter. This begins, or continues, a dialogue about drunk and impaired driving that will continue throughout the program and allow students to feel supported as they participate."

The two-day program is dramatic and emotional ... and purposely so.

As "Every 15 Minutes" organizers point out, teens are constantly reminded about the choices they must make involving alcohol and how many others are affected by their decisions. While they may know the



**ABOVE: FUNERAL DIRECTORS RANDY VAN LEUVEN AND DEE HARBISON PREPARE TO TAKE THE “ACCIDENT VICTIM” INTO THEIR CARE DURING THE “EVERY 15 MINUTES” PROGRAM. RIGHT: DEANNA (DEE) HARBISON IS THE LOCATION LEADER AT SPRINGFIELD MEMORIAL GARDENS & FUNERAL HOME IN SPRINGFIELD, OREGON. (PHOTOS COURTESY OF FOUNDATION PARTNERS GROUP)**

---

intellectual statistics, many believe it will never happen to them.

Until it does.

At the start of the school day, Oct. 3, a member of law enforcement dressed as a Grim Reaper went to each participating student’s classroom along with clergy and removed the selected student from their class. After the student was removed, a chaplain read the obituary written by the student or the parents/guardian to the class.

Participating students were taken to a room in the school and is made up with face paint and a full black hooded gown, becoming the “living dead,” where they were no longer in communication with friends and family for the remainder of the two-day event.





**ABOVE: FUNERAL DIRECTORS RANDY VAN LEUVEN AND DEE HARBISON, ALONG WITH SHERIFF DEPUTY SGT. THOMAS SPELDRICH OF THE LANE COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT, LOAD THE "ACCIDENT VICTIM" INTO A HEARSE DURING THE "EVERY 15 MINUTES" PROGRAM. OPPOSITE PAGE (FROM LEFT): FUNERAL DIRECTORS RANDY VAN LEUVEN AND DEE HARBISON, SHERIFF DEPUTY SGT. THOMAS SPELDRICH OF THE LANE COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT, AND THE GRIM REAPER. (PHOTOS COURTESY OF FOUNDATION PARTNERS GROUP)**

These students were then asked to create their own headstone and write on it what they wanted to be remembered for. The headstones were then placed in a mock cemetery located on school grounds.

During the afternoon of the first day, students were escorted to the crash scene, a simulated two-car, drunk or impaired driving crash that results in the death of one teen occupant and injuries to several others. The crashed cars were set up in the crashed position ahead of time for safety, and students were staged in the vehicles as to demonstrate that the crash had just occurred.

Police, fire, and EMS "responded" to the crash in the same manner as they would any other crash of this nature. Fire personnel extricated the students from the vehicles to add to the event's impact. Once fire/EMS concluded patient treatment and the victims left the scene (either on foot or by ambulance), the at-fault teen driver was processed for DUI and arrested, and the deceased student was transported by hearse.

"It is so realistic; the first time we participated, I had to remind myself it was a mock set-up, not real life," Harbison said.

When Harbison and the funeral home were first asked to participate, the sheriff's



## Are you prepared for your succession?



**Bring your legacy into focus with Foresight.**

The future is unpredictable. Let our tailored Succession Planning and Advisory services guide you through the process.

[THEFORESIGHTCOMPANIES.COM](http://THEFORESIGHTCOMPANIES.COM) | (800) 426-0165



office asked if a hearse – rather than a van – could be used for the program. “They believed a hearse would be more impactful,” Harbison said. “And it is. When we drive up in the hearse, it’s real. When we remove the stretcher, it’s real. When we put the sheet over the girl, it was real. When we drove away over the rocky road, it was real.”

The goal, Harbison said, was to replicate, as much as possible, the removal of a body. “We didn’t put the girl in a body bag, but in every other way possible, we tried to be realistic,” she said. “What we did, though, was talk to the girl in whispers, explaining what we were going to do and how we would do it.”

Even though it’s a simulation, the event’s impact is seen on the students’ faces.

“You see it when the fire and EMS are at work, the power tools are at work, and you begin to see the somberness setting in,” Harbison said. “When the ‘deceased’ is removed from the vehicle, you can hear the gasps from the students. When we’re transferring the loved one into the hearse and shutting the door, it’s impactful in a big way.”

In some cases, she added, the Grim Reaper will shut the door of the funeral coach or put his hand on the coach and just stare in the back window for a couple beats. “And then we just step back, nod, and off we go,” Harbison said. “The qui-

etness is profound; the magnitude of that moment is raw and real.”

Students who were participants in the program were then taken to Camp Harlow, where they stayed the night. At the retreat, there are other event-related activities, including a presentation by police/fire personnel, which explains what your body goes through in a crash and the financial burdens and other damages that can occur. The night concluded with a letter-writing exercise where students will write a letter to someone in their life as if they had lost their life in an impaired or distracted driving-related crash.

One family was also asked to participate in mock death notification as part of the program. Police and clergy went to the family’s house and made the notification. The family members spoke about that experience the next day at the assembly.

The assembly, emceed by the sheriff’s office, was the focus of the program’s second day, which included the video from the previous day’s activities, the family members who participated in the mock death notification, and a guest speaker who had their lives impacted by a drunk or impaired driving incident.

In addition, a pledge wall was placed in the gym, and students were allowed to write on and sign it. By signing this wall, students took a pledge not to drink and

drive, and to never ride with someone who has been drinking.

Unlike other programs, “Every 15 Minutes” approaches the topic of impaired and distracted driving not only by looking at the effects of drinking and driving as it relates to traffic crashes but also the emotional impact of these incidents. It demonstrates how these crashes affect not only the teen but their family, friends, and the community, the Lane County Sheriff’s Office explained on its website. In addition, the program has recently started to emphasize distracted driving as a topic, given the use of cell phones and other distractions that can reduce a driver’s focus on the road and their surroundings.

For Harbison, who has been a funeral director for 30 years, being involved in such programs is an honor.

“Even though this was a mock crash, it did have an impact, as does every interaction we have with a family,” she said. “These real-life events impact us just as much as they do the community as a whole,” she said. “When families entrust us, especially when it’s a tragic situation, and we’re able to make a difference and help the family through the process and honor their loved one, there is no greater feeling.”

Videos from previous events can be found by going to YouTube and searching “Every 15 Minutes Lane County Sheriff.” •