

Teen tragedy brings about scholarship

Written by Austin Benson

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Driver's education expenses covered for recipients

Inexperienced drivers can make mistakes behind the wheel even when it seems nothing can go wrong.

Teenagers don't have to be going to a homecoming dance or a football game or cruising the main drag on Friday night for those mistakes to happen either.

In fact, Erika Rowan, 16-year-old daughter of Erik and Jackie Rowan of Lexington, had an accident in Cozad, in February 2008, that resulted in her death.

Erik, an investigator for the Lexington Police Department, said accidents can happen at any time.

"It doesn't have to be a wild night for something bad to happen while driving," he said.

Erika was riding with a driver who had her license for only two months.

The vehicle was traveling more than 70 miles per hour on a gravel road when it rolled.

The Nebraska Department of Roads said 22% of all vehicle accidents in 2011 involved a driver 19 years old or younger and 40% of accidents with teen drivers were a result of speeding.

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After Erika's death, Erik and Jackie started the Erika Joy Rowan Foundation that provided scholarship money to a student interested in pursuing a career in the medical field. That lasted for two years before the Rowans didn't feel it impacted and educated enough students about driving.

"We wanted to make sure that young drivers were able to go through driver's education courses and we knew it was expensive," Rowan said.

All the money given for scholarships is donated by

local businesses and from charity events, Erik said, and the goal is to provide everyone a scholarship who goes through a driving course.

Young drivers can fill out the Be A Defensive Driver scholarship application to receive cost coverage for their local driving course.

The application is for student drivers in Dawson County and Elwood, Rowan said, and is due by April 1.

Gothenburg students are taking advantage of the opportunity for the first time.

"We didn't know there was a scholarship up until this year," instructor Steve Reeves said. "It was just an awareness factor."

Now that local students know there is possible coverage for the \$150 course, applications are getting filled out.

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“All 33 students were given an application and four have already completed the essays and gotten letters of recommendation,” Reeves said.

Not all applications are awarded scholarships. The foundation’s panel goes through all the applications and decides who may receive the scholarship based on answers given in essay form.

Erik said in its first year eight drivers were awarded full coverage. Forty-one teenagers were selected last year.

“I assume we will find out after April 1 if we have some students receiving a scholarship,” Reeves said.

Erik said the point of the scholarship is allowing teenage drivers to gain knowledge and resources to make smart driving decisions.

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