

Former student returns home to fight growing 'epidemic'



By Brock Weir

Little more than a year ago, Darren Mason was just like any number of those 'absolute idiots' you see on the road every day. He was something of a slave to technology texting and driving, but last July a personal tragedy helped transform his life and now the former Aurora student is taking his message on the road to make distracted driving a thing of the past.

Mr. Mason, 49, a graduate of St. Andrew's College, returned to his old stomping grounds Friday with a simple, universal language: keep your eyes on the road.

Last year, he lost a very close friend, Dave Lash, and his father, Anthony Lash, in a car crash caused by a 17-year-old distracted driver. His friend's daughter, close in age to Darren's own, survived the crash.

'[Our friends] got together a year ago to remember Dave and we said it looks like there is an epidemic of texting and driving,' said Mr. Mason before delivering a speech to the entire St. Andrew's College student body. 'Dave was such a warm, great guy. Like everybody, he had his stuff, we all have our stuff to deal with, but he never showed it.'

To honour Dave's memory, Darren and his friends decided to pool their resources to launch a grassroots 'Eyes on the Road' campaign distributing wristbands and spearheading an awareness campaign so drivers and passengers follow that simple message and stow their phones.

'The hardest part was realising I was an absolute idiot beforehand for texting and driving,' explained Mr. Mason. 'Now the phone goes in the glove box. On the one hand, technology is great and everything is Bluetooth, and you can use Siri without even going to your phone. In some regards, technology has helped you but on the other hand, technology has allowed you to see cat videos when you're driving. It's quite a bit of that two-sided sword.'

'Part of the tragedy was the driver whose car left its lane and ran into Dave's was charged with distracted driving at 17 years old. I have a boy who is 17 and when he gets into the car I know he is looking for that song on Spotify. We can't do it. Nobody can handle doing the multitasking, but the number of hits young people are getting on their phone [is] like a drug. I get it, but what can I do to help prevent these tragedies?'

Coming back to his school last week, he Mr. Mason said he was not just trying to target kids and tell them to keep their eyes on the road, but also feel 'empowered' to go home and tell their parents, grandparents and anybody they see to shape up.

'I want them to have the courage to tell people, 'You're playing Russian Roulette, but not with a gun. It's a grenade,' he said. 'I struggled a bit [with the message] because here I am going to go in front of a school and [the reaction could be], 'Here's this dad, this old guy, thanks, Pops,' but I wanted the message to be, 'It's not just you, it's the people around you, the people you care for, family members,' and give them a message that empowers them and makes them realise they can make a difference, they can control the situation, and realise that it is socially unacceptable now to text and drive. It's not cool.'

And, following the assembly, this message will be on the wrists of every student who each received a band to wear or dangle from their rear-view window.

Before his graduation from SAC in 1986, Mr. Mason said he still remembers one assembly where a man came to give a talk about drinking and driving. At that point, he said, it was becoming a particular epidemic among youth. The man shared a story about how he lost a friend to a drunk driver and it stuck with him. Nearly 20 years later, he is carrying on this legacy by imparting this same experience ? albeit with a different root problem ? with the students of today.

?I wish I didn't have to go to Dave's funeral and I wish I didn't have to see the look on his daughter's face,? he said. ?Tragedy is going to happen, I get it, but this was truly senseless. It was not his time. [The driver] is probably a really good kid, innocent, a nice guy with good friends, who liked sports. He wasn't evil, he was just distracted.

?It is everybody's responsibility to change this epidemic and we all have the power to do it. Knowing we all know it is a stupid thing, let's change the dynamic. Let's change people's mindsets and let's change this epidemic.?

A grassroots campaign, as ?Eyes on the Road? gains momentum, Mr. Mason said he and his group would like to see this grow into a global awareness campaign geared towards millennials. Interest has already been shown in countries ranging from the United Kingdom to Turkey and here at home they would love to have their wristbands distributed through the school systems and by police at RIDE checks. For more information visit www.eyesotr.com.