

Billboard of friendly faces has sobering message for drivers

By Caitlyn May
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Drivers on Highway 99 in Cottage Grove are used to the familiar sites of the neighborhood. It's where the Interstate 5-connector relieves travelers of highway speeds and allows them to glide into the city past one coffee chop and then another; a stoplight, then a diner and a gas station; a thrift store and, just before the second stoplight — there's a new addition to the scene.

The billboard hangs just over where Whitaker Ave. meets Highway 99 and features five teenagers smiling at passersby. The photo is in black and white and its creator, Bruce Berg, hopes the message he's promoting is seen and, more importantly, acknowledged:

Don't text and drive.

In 2017, Lane County had the most traffic deaths of any other county in the state. The report cited deaths stemming from rollovers, vehicles hitting bicycles, vehicles hitting standing objects such as trees and poles, pedestrians being hit and head-on collisions.

And while the study does not cite causes for the accidents, distracted driving has drawn the attention of Oregon lawmakers.

During the 2017 session, the legislature closed a loophole in state law that origi-



The billboard created by photographer Bruce Berg is one of five around the county aimed at reminding people of the dangers of distracted driving, and texting while driving in particular.

vances have on individuals as well as society as a whole — and the sound of notifications from our phones, whether it be text alerts, social media chimes or an old fashion ring, is making us anxious.

According to Larry Rosen, professor at California State University, Dominguez Hills, the average person checks their phone 60 times a day. Rosen authored, "The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in a High-Tech World."

In the book, he notes that the sound of cell phone notifications can produce an anxiety over what we may be being alerted to that makes it difficult to ignore the notification. The sound of a notification produces a physical reaction for the cell phone owner.

The teenagers featured on Berg's billboard had to make a promise; they wouldn't text and drive and Berg hopes they live up to that promise.

"They're being held accountable in a way," said Berg. "Maybe their friends see them texting and driving and say, 'Hey you're on that billboard.'"

nally prohibited talking on a cell phone while driving but did not address other uses such as scrolling through social media feeds, texting or engaging with music and entertainment apps.

On July 1, penalties for using a phone in any manner while driving went into effect, including fines up to \$2,500 and six months in jail.

According to the Lane County Sheriff's Office, no new citations for using a cell phone were written as of Monday, July 9.

"The new law helped a lot, I think," said Berg, who decided to advertise his cause



COURTESY PHOTOS

on five billboards around the county after his daughter took part in a program at school called "Every 15 Minutes."

The program stages a car accident and designates students who "died" in the acci-

dents. It's meant to warn of the dangers of drinking and driving but Berg said he was surprised when his daughter told him that the experience only touched on texting and driving.

"Everyone does it on some

level," Berg said. "And teenagers have admitted to doing it too."

A 2015 statistic from the Department of Motor Vehicles notes that 46 percent of teenagers nationwide had reported texting while driving at some point since getting their license. And while state agencies, school programs and parents like Berg are attempting to educate people about the dangers of texting and driving, stopping the potentially deadly habit might not be so easy.

With every new technological advance, comes the institutional studies that examine the effects these ad-

LORANE NEWS

• Thank you to all who came out to support the ben-

efit for Michael and Amber on Saturday. Also, a very spe-

cial thanks to all who organized and worked on it, and

all who donated.

• The annual Crow Car Show is this Saturday, July 14, at Crow Middle/High School. There will be many exciting events for all ages and an amazing array of cars and great food. This is the major Crow Booster Club fundraiser for the schools in our district, so come sup-

port our kids.

• Lorane Grange meets on Thursday, July 19 at 7 p.m. That is also the week of the Lane County Fair. Grange Day is on Wednesday, July 18 with Grangers serving free cookies and coffee.

Kids can get in free with a dressed veggie or fruit, for those up to 10 years old.

Be sure to vote for your favorite grange booth. See you at the fair.

• Sign up for the community-wide garage sale Aug. 4 to have your home on the map.

Call Jeri Porter to rent a table at Lorane Grange. Both are \$10.

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