

A dose of reality for teenagers

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* Bobby Petrocelli, whose wife was killed by a drunken driver, brings his tough message about responsibility to three area high schools.

NARRAGANSETT - Ten minutes into his hour-long talk at Narragansett High School yesterday, Bobby Petrocelli stopped pacing for what would be the only time, sat on the steps of the auditorium stage and recounted the horrific night that changed his life.

Before a hushed crowd of freshmen and sophomores, Petrocelli described the scene of waking up in the dining room, head busted and arm broken, and not understanding the significance of the headlights that illuminated his damaged house.

A drunken driver had just plowed his 34-ton pickup truck at 70 mph through the brick wall of Bobby and Ava Petrocelli's bedroom in Texas. Ava was pinned under the truck and suffocated before rescue workers could save her.

In about 10 seconds, that driver had altered Bobby Petrocelli's life.

But the accident in 1985 didn't begin when the driver lost control and crossed the median, Petrocelli said. The accident began many years before that when the driver had his first drink, setting in motion a pattern of behavior that continued throughout his life.

"You know why the man crashed drunk through my house and killed Ava?" he asked. "From the first time he abused alcohol in high school to the last time, at 35 years old, he was preparing his life to fail, and never even realized it."

Actions, he said, have consequences. Everything good and bad that we do affects all of us. Lack of preparation is the same as preparing to fail.

"Forget the lie that life is about the moment," Petrocelli said.

For the past nine years Petrocelli, a motivational speaker, has been delivering a message that combines faith, forgiveness and personal responsibility.

Petrocelli, the nephew of former Boston Red Sox infielder Rico Petrocelli, also spoke yesterday to high school students in South Kingstown and Warwick. His visit was sponsored by the Katie DeCubellis Foundation, named for the 13-year-old Narragansett resident who was killed by a drunken driver in October 1999.

Public outrage at Katie's death was instrumental in the DeCubellis' successful campaign last year to lower the legal blood-alcohol concentration for drivers from .10 to .08. Meg DeCubellis also is the vice president for the Rhode Island chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

"It was awesome, very moving," said student Catherine Ranaldi, who knew Katie from their time together at the Pier School. "I've never heard that good of a presentation here at all."

Petrocelli said he's not as concerned with what teenagers do as he is with why they do it. Drug and alcohol abuse often take root with the desire to fit in or the pain of being left out, which is why his presentations deal more with life's problems in general, especially the ones faced by teenagers.

Most of his 220 talks each year are to high school and college students, he said.

"High school is a very pivotal point in their life," Petrocelli said. "They want to be understood, and they start running to everything and anything to be accepted. They might be tempted when they're younger, but high school is really where they test the waters even more. That's where they set up their lives to succeed or fail in the future."

Perseverance, hope and second chances are other components of his message. One year after Ava's death, he met Suzanne Nick. They married three years later and now have two sons. The proud father beamed as he hoisted the two 3-foot "wallet-sized" photos of his two children for all to see.

"If I had given up, I'd have never known that I could go on," he said.