



PHOTOS BY MATT HAMILTON/Daily Citizen-News
Whitfield County firefighters work to free an injured youth from a simulated car crash as part of the Teen Maze event on Tuesday at the North Georgia Fairgrounds.

Teen Maze event shows consequences of choices

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Nelly Hernandez, a North Murray High School sophomore, sat on a back pew with tears rolling down her cheeks as Dalton Police Department Chaplain Raymond McCranie "eulogized" classmate Noah Cudd Tuesday morning.

The "funeral," part of a Teen Maze scenario, was not real but Hernandez's tears were.

"It's scary to think how minutes can change somebody's life," she said afterwards. "The decisions you make can impact your whole life and it affects me just thinking about it."

Cudd was "killed" in a car accident by a young drunk driver.

"In a moment a split-second decision changed their lives forever," said McCranie.

At the end of the "funeral" service, maze volunteer Ray Cochran told students "negative decisions can bring premature consequences." He then opened the casket for students to view an example — inside the casket was a full length mirror.

The funeral scene is one of many scenarios that has been acted out this week during Teen Maze, "an event



Chaplain Raymond McCranie with the Dalton Police Department consoles Susan Ridley as she plays the mother of a child killed in a car crash.

that provides a safe and controlled environment for students to face the consequences of randomly selected lifestyle choices often associated with risky youth behaviors," a press release states.

"The maze is designed as an interactive 'Game of Life' where students see the consequences of life choices in a hands-on, realistic

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Maze

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and educational way," said Carlene Mutter, coordinator of Dalton/Whitfield County Family Connection, one of the organizations that presents the annual event. "The goal of the program is to increase their understanding of personal responsibility and the importance of making positive life choices."

This week through today, more than 2,100 sophomores from Dalton, Whitfield and Murray county schools are expected to take part in the event at the North Georgia Fairgrounds. The maze shows scenarios and related consequences such as underage drinking, driving under the influence, texting and driving, and teen pregnancy.

Sandra Ridley played Cudd's mother. She volunteers for Teen Maze to give important messages to young people.

"If you can plant this seed in kids at this age and save a few from bad choices, then as a community member you're ensuring the future of our community and that's a good thing," Ridley said.

Amber Biggs is a participant in the Conasauga Drug Court program. She told students her life started going downhill once she began using meth and got arrested.

"This is my mugshot on the right and the picture on the left is me recently on vacation," she said pointing to the wall.

Biggs, 25, said she sat in jail six months on a possession of meth charge.

"That's when I took a real hard look at myself and what I really want for my life," she said.

This is her second year participating in Teen Maze. She called it a "freeing feeling" to help others make better choices.

Mutter said Teen Maze wouldn't be successful without volunteers and community members.

"I want to thank our community, the school systems, first responders and hospitals," she said. "We have around 300 volunteers here every day and we couldn't do it without them."

Mutter said organizers feel like the majority of students think it's an emotional experience.

"They visualize if that was my mom receiving a call or my brother, sister or best friend that dies," she said. "It becomes very personal getting in the zone without having to suffer the real consequences."



PHOTOS BY MATT HAMILTON/Daily Citizen-News
Students from Murray County Schools listen as Dalton Police Department Chaplain Raymond McCranie reads a mock eulogy for a student killed in a car crash during the Teen Maze event on Tuesday.



North Murray High School sophomores draw various life choices at random during the Teen Maze event at the North Georgia Fairgrounds.

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