

Hypnotized By Sober Second Thoughts

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A unique campaign to teach students the dangers of getting behind the wheel intoxicated is based on altering the mindset -- at least temporarily through hypnosis, to recreate horrific accidents, ALEXANDRA GILL reports

CHILLIWACK, B.C. -- Twenty minutes ago, Chad Benson was the life of the party. His classmates at Sardis Senior Secondary School laughed hysterically when he was led into a hypnotic trance, kicked up his heels and pretended to be Michael Flatley, Lord of the Dance.

Then the lights dimmed and the sound of two cars crashing slammed through loudspeakers.

Down on the school gymnasium floor, in the glare of blue strobe lights, Mr. Benson now drags his former Feet of Flames through the wreckage of an imaginary drunk-driving accident. Up in the stands, 1,400 students stare in stunned silence as the 18-year-old cradles another hypnotized male student in his arms, slumps over the limp body and cries out in anguish.

"I can't feel my legs," a student from the second car screams. The other hypnotized participants wail and moan, as imaginary tears slide down their cheeks.

The grief these 14 students just experienced lasted less than five minutes. "Not everyone is so lucky," says Marc Savard, the hypnotist who presented this startling alcohol-awareness demonstration on Monday, less than a week away from the school's graduation celebration, when the message is perhaps most pertinent.

Mr. Savard assures the students -- and other hypnotists later agreed -- that this session will not leave them traumatized for life. Still, according to the participants, the lesson isn't one they'll easily forget.

"You can't forget something like that," says Mr. Benson, still looking stunned 30 minutes later. Will he ever drink and drive? He spits out his reply without a moment's hesitation.

"Absolutely not! And if any of my friends tried, I would wrestle them for the keys."

Aaron Bartsch, the "drunk driver" behind the wheel, says the experience was so vivid, he thought he was going to throw up. "I was so angry at myself, I can't even describe it. I just kept thinking to myself, 'What have I done?' "

Mr. Savard, a former Kelowna resident now based in Las Vegas, has just wrapped a Canadian tour of 50 high schools. In B.C., he is endorsed by ICBC, the provincial insurance corporation. And for the past two years, his \$1,500 show -- Your Mind, Your Power, Your Choice -- has been paid for by the Road Safety program, funded by the province's individual auto-plan brokers in partnership with ICBC.

"I'm not making huge money from this," says Mr. Savard, who normally charges \$4,000 (U.S.) for his "cluck-like-a-chicken" corporate entertainment shows. "I do it because it helps me sleep at night."

In 1996, Mr. Savard -- already a hypnotist -- was hit by a drunk driver in a head-on collision.

He was returning home from a performance.

He broke his back and was rescued just moments before his Ford Explorer burst into flames. The drunk driver in the other car died.

"I remember the feel of brain fluid leaking out my nose," Mr. Savard, now 29, tells the students during a slide presentation of photos from the accident that accompanies his two-hour show.

Like many young adults, Mr. Savard thought he was invincible. "I never thought it could happen to me," he explains. "I didn't even drink."

After the crash, he began speaking to schools in Western Canada and the United States about the dangers of drunk driving. According to statistics from Mothers Against Drunk Driving, 40 per cent of teenage drivers who are killed in road crashes have been drinking.

He soon realized that his lecture wasn't enough and he began incorporating hypnotism into his presentation.

His method of shock therapy seems to work on teens. But first he has to get their attention.

"Are we going to have some fun or what?" Mr. Savard asks at the beginning of the show, as strobe lights flash through the dark and rock music blares through the speakers. The students roar their approval.

About 100 students dash forward at the request for volunteers.

"Close your eyes and let your whole body relax," Mr. Savard instructs. He takes them all through a number of easy hypnotic suggestions -- pretending they are part of an orchestra, then a heavy-metal band -- weeding out those who are obviously nervous or faking the trance.

As the group is whittled down to 14, the pranks continue for about 45 minutes. The hypnotized teens prance around like ballerinas. They win a make-believe lottery. They lick invisible lollipops "as big as a beach ball." Told their neighbour "is the ugliest person you've ever seen in the world," they look around with horrified expressions, a few gagging.

The crowd is in stitches. Mr. Savard has them eating out of his hand.

The power of the mind is a wondrous thing, says Mr. Savard, who credits hypnosis for his own fast recovery from the accident. His crash occurred on Aug. 1. By Oct. 9, he was playing hockey again. "We all have this ability, we just have to learn how to use it."

Not everyone is as comfortable with the concept of hypnosis. Some schools have declined his presentation, fearing parents might object. Bob Patterson, principal of Sardis Senior Secondary, was one.

"I was concerned about the hypnosis part," he explains. "My mind was changed in a hurry" after watching the presentation at a nearby school.

"What I enjoyed most is that it provided an opportunity for kids to talk about their experiences with other kids. We can show all the videos in the world we want, but kids are going to listen to people they know."

Before each high-school appearance, Mr. Savard makes sure that notices are sent home to warn parents about what will happen. Students are not obliged to attend.

"We have a lot of Road Sense speakers who are very good," says Debbie Wilson, an ICBC insurance broker in the Fraser Valley. "But Marc has a bit more impact because he involves the students. It's a very effective way of getting the message across to the kids because they see their friends going through the emotions.

"And as Marc says during the presentation, they can walk away at the end of the show. In real life, that doesn't happen. That's a very important message we want to get across."

Back in the gymnasium, the lights go dim. "What you're about to see is not going to be funny," Mr. Savard warns. "If you're uncomfortable with it, feel free to leave."

The volunteers are divided into two groups. "All of you are coming home drunk from a high-school graduation party," he says to the people in the first car. "None of you should be driving."

Aaron Bartsch is moved to the front row. "You are the driver. All the guilt, fear and panic will be on your shoulders," Mr. Savard calmly explains.

The other students are passengers. One girl will smash into the windshield. Her face will need reconstructive surgery, but it will never be the same again. Another will be paralyzed from the waist down.

"You're not going to feel the [physical] pain," Mr. Savard assures them, "but you will feel all the emotion that goes with it."

In the second car, a family is returning from a birthday party. One of the children will be killed.

"Morgan, you will not move at all because for the purpose of this demonstration, you are dead," Mr. Savard says. "Mom, it's going to take a few minutes for you to realize you've just lost a child."

The final instructions are whispered into each volunteer's ears. Dad is told he cannot make any physical contact with the driver -- Mr. Savard has had to break up fistfights in the past.

To the young woman who needs surgery, Mr. Savard suggests she hold her face "to keep it all in" and make the scenario more visual for the audience, who will not feel her horror.

The music stops. The sound of screeching car tires echoes through the gym. There is a crash. And then all is quiet. In a few moments, the wailing begins.

"This situation was a figment of your imagination," Mr. Savard says as he leads the students out of the trance. "You will never experience these emotions again, but you will remember them and be able to think about them objectively."

He turns to the audience. "The people here will never drink and drive again. But it's already too late. Someone is paralyzed. Somebody is dead."

He turns to Morgan Cox. "How does it feel to be dead?"

"Uh, pretty dead," says Mr. Cox, who is still trembling.

"Is there hockey in the afterlife?"

Mr. Cox stares at the hypnotist incredulously.

"Just kidding," says Mr. Savard, gently slapping the student on the back.

"That's the idea behind this demonstration," he says, returning to the audience. "I want you to talk to your friends about it. Laugh about it, joke about it, cry about it. But the next time you're out drinking, please think twice about driving."