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## New epidemic: driving while texting

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Roberto Koltun / El Nuevo Herald

Carter Cabassa, 9, stands next to a coffin at Woodlawn Park South Cemetery in Kendall during the filming of Miami-Dade Expressway Authority's new safety campaign, "The Last Word," which aims to generate international awareness for the extreme dangers of texting while driving.

A gray casket sat in the center of a burial plot at Kendall's Woodlawn Park South Cemetery. As the morning sun gleamed off the silver fixtures, 9-year-old Carter Cabassa walks slowly over and joins five other pallbearers carrying the casket to its final resting place.

As the pallbearers take their first steps, someone yells, "Roll camera, action!" The solemn scene unfolding in the cemetery Thursday is a commercial shoot organized by the Miami-Dade Expressway Authority, to be used to extoll the dangers texting while driving.

The two-day commercial production is in association with the expressway authority's new safety campaign, "The Last Word," which aims to generate international awareness for the extreme dangers of texting while driving.

"We don't want to give too much away," expressway authority spokesperson Cindy Polo-Serantes said, "but we want to show there are consequences to our actions."

The commercial's premise focuses on what happens after someone is killed in a texting-related vehicle accident. It is to be launched on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and the agency's website on May 1.

"What we've realized is a lot of the campaigns out there focus on the driver's perspective," Polo-Serantes said. "What we're trying to show is the after effect on one's family."

The expressway authority joins organizations around the country that are developing campaigns to display the dangers of driving while texting.

FocusDriven, the first national nonprofit organization dedicated to advocating for victims of distracted driving, post names and stories of those killed in accidents related to phone use.

One of the stories highlights is that of Margay Schee, 13, of Marion County who was killed in 2008 after a semi-truck driver - distracted by his cell phone - slammed into the back of her school bus, pushing it 20 feet and causing it to explode.

The teen was one of 21 children on the bus, and the only one to die.

Also, the U.S. Department of Transportation unveiled the latest in its “Faces of Distracted Driving” video series earlier this year, exploring the consequences of texting and cell phone use while driving.

The video, which is posted on the federal government’s official, features people from across the country who have been injured or lost loved ones in distracted driving crashes.

“Distracted driving is a deadly epidemic,” Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said in a statement. “When it comes to road safety, we will not take a backseat to anyone. That’s why distracted driving will continue to be a major part of DOT’s robust safety agenda.”

In 2010, the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers joined the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons (AAOS) and the Orthopaedic Trauma Association (OTA) in a national public education campaign on the dangers of texting while driving.

The partnership’s efforts included placing their “OMG: Get the Message” campaign signs in doctors’ waiting rooms nationwide and on the side of buses buses in the Washington D.C. area.

“Our first goal is to help change the way drivers think,” said Miami-Dade’s Polo-Serantes. “Stats are showing driving while texting is just as dangerous as driving while intoxicated. Something needs to change.”

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