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Magnets attract new drivers

Family's firm lets motorists know a rookie is at the wheel

Chad D. Lerch / Associated Press

SPRING LAKE, Mich. -- Corinne Fortenbacher's drive to keep her son safe behind the wheel has grown into a business that is gaining national exposure.

The Spring Lake family has designed magnet decals for cars that identify teen drivers. But unlike many of the other student driving magnets on the market, they are "cool," said Fortenbacher's teenage son, Austin.

Supporters say the magnets let other drivers know to back off -- and that helps teens develop confidence behind the wheel.

It all started with a near collision in May 2006, when Austin was driving home from a Secretary of State office, where he had just received his learner's permit.

With Corinne Fortenbacher in the passenger's seat, an impatient truck driver pulled up on the then-15-year-old Fortenbacher's rear bumper and honked his horn as they approached a construction zone. Austin took his eyes off the road when he turned to see the truck. The car swerved, and the Fortenbachers barely escaped an accident.

"He about crashed into the barrels. It was simple inexperience," said his father, Jeff.

Corinne Fortenbacher did something about it. She got on the Internet and found bumper stickers that said "student driver in training."

"Austin thought they were stupid," she said. "He said, 'If I have to put that on my car, I just won't drive.' "

So they agreed to design one that Austin and his friends would think was cool. As a sports fan, Austin said "Rookie Driver" sounded better than "Student Driver" because he could relate it to rookie athletes.

Then they showed the magnet design to girls in his class. And they agreed.

The final design featured a sporty look with white, red and black block letters. There are three versions. A 10-by-7-inch model says, "Rookie Driver in Training," while the 7-by-4 1/2 -inch magnets say, "Rookie Driver" or "New Driver."

With that, RookieDriver.net was born.

"It has helped a lot," Austin said. "When they recognize that I'm new, they give me a lot more space. And if I mess up, they don't get road rage and stuff like that."

His mother agreed.

"It certainly makes the new driver a lot more relaxed because people aren't so aggressive toward them," she said. "So, yeah, I do think this could save a life."

She said the magnets have been sold to customers in 44 states and Canada.

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