

Magnets for new drivers an idea that sticks

Mich. families get creative to help kids

December 2, 2007

BY CHAD D. LERCH

MUSKEGON CHRONICLE

SPRING LAKE -- 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 new drivers. But unlike a growing number of other student-driving magnets on the market, these are actually cool, said Fortenbacher's son, Austin, 16.

Advertisement

Supporters said the magnets let other drivers know to back off -- and that helps new drivers develop confidence.

It all started with a near-collision in May 2006, when Austin had just received his learner's permit.

A truck driver pulled up on Austin's bumper and honked his horn as they approached a construction zone. Austin took his eyes off the road to see the truck. The car swerved, and the Fortenbachers barely escaped an accident.

Corinne Fortenbacher decided to do something. She got on the Internet and found bumper stickers that said "student driver in training."

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

Like other families, including some in Michigan, they agreed to design a magnet.

As a sports fan, Austin said "Rookie Driver" sounded better than "Student Driver."

The final design features 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."

And that's how 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."

But getting all young drivers to buy into the concept can be a tough sell.

"The older kids would mess with you," said Alex Chapman, 17. "Adults might lay off, and it would work if you had a parent in the car with you. But I wouldn't drive around with one. As soon as I'd leave the driveway,

I'd take it off."

Suzanne Zabowski of Canton, who created magnetic signs that say "Permit Driver" when her daughter, Kayla, started driving, said the signs work.

"When people see student drivers in a driving class, people automatically back off and give them space," Zabowski said. "Why can't we have that when they're still on a permit learning how to drive?"

Kayla tested the magnet, which her architect father designed to not be flashy and to leave out words like "teen" or "caution" to reduce the embarrassment factor.

"It was amazing," Suzanne Zabowski said of the difference in how other drivers reacted to Kayla on the road. "It really did work."

The Zabowskis' signs can be bought at www.permitdriversign.com.

Free Press columnist Matt Helms contributed to this report.

Find this article at:

<http://www.freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2007712020649>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.