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(Photo by Ken Stevens/Associated Press)
Getting started: Austin Fortenbacher, 16, and his mother, Corinne, display their "Rookie Driver" magnets in Ferrysburg.

Mother, son create magnet decals to identify rookie teenage drivers

Close call inspired family to request space on the road

Chad D. Lerch
Associated Press

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 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 the Secretary of State's office where he'd just received his learner's permit.

Impatient driver

With Corinne 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 Fortenbacher.

Corinne decided to do 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.

RookieDriver.net

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," Corinne 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, and the company has been featured in several national publications.

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."

Shelbie Frifeldt, 17, agreed: "People are idiots - they're not going to listen to a bumper sticker."

Austin, now 16, no longer uses the sticker. But he recommends them to friends and classmates.

"He got to the point where he had the confidence and we had the confidence in him. He's a full-fledged driver right now," Corinne said.