

## Muskegon Chronicle

### Young driver creates cool way to get drivers to back off

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By Chad D. Lerch

[clerch@muskegonchronicle.com](mailto:clerch@muskegonchronicle.com)

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 they aren't just any magnets. They are "cool," said Fortenbacher's teenage son, Austin, unlike many of the other student-driving magnets on the market.

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.

Fortenbacher's son, Austin, had just received his learner's permit in Grand Haven. He asked to drive home from the Secretary of State's office.

With Corinne in the passenger's seat, they approached a construction zone on U.S. 31 near Jackson Street when an impatient truck driver rattled the 15-year-old's nerves.

The truck driver pulled up on Fortenbacher's rear bumper and honked his horn. That forced Austin into a rookie mistake: He 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.

When they got home, she got on the Internet and found bumper stickers that said "student driver in training." The Grand Haven YMCA also issues student-driver magnets.

"Austin thought they were stupid. 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. The mother-and-son team brainstormed slogans -- some passed the test, others didn't.

Austin said "Student Driver" seemed lame. But since he's a sports fan, "Rookie Driver" sounded better because he could relate it to rookie athletes.

To be sure, they ran it through the ultimate coolness test -- they showed the magnet design to girls in his class.

"They all said, 'Yeah, that's way cooler than the lame ones out there,' " Corinne said.

They ended up with a sporty design 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. And Austin is reaping the benefits.

"It has helped a lot. 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," Austin said.

His mother agreed.

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

She said the product has received positive feedback. The magnets have been sold to customers in 44 states and Canada. The company has been featured in several national publications.

Kadi Brown, an 18-year-old student at Grand Haven, said she liked the magnet idea. "I think it would help make student drivers feel less targeted out there," she said.

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."

Corinne said she has seen firsthand how the decal works. One night, she was heading to the high school and the driver behind her "backed way off."

"I said to myself, 'I'll bet I have one of those magnets on.' And sure enough, I did," she said. "And I'll tell you, it works."

An out-of-town company manufactures the magnets for the family. But the family handles all other aspects of the business. Corinne does the marketing, mailing and customer service while Jeff Fortenbacher runs the Web site.

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

"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.