

The Macomb Daily

Watch for billboard designed by Dakota High School student, not your phone

Student's distracted driving design chosen for TIA campaign



Johnathon Putrus Jr., a ninth-grader at Dakota High School and the son of Johnathon and Amanda Putrus displays his winning design for distracted driving billboards. GINA JOSEPH – THE MACOMB DAILY

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Johnathon Putrus Jr. admitted it was the \$500 prize money that first attracted him to a Transportation Improvement Association (TIA) contest challenging Michigan high school students to design a distracted driving awareness billboard that would remind people of the new law.

‘I thought it would be cool to enter and win the money,’ Putrus said.



The distracted driving billboard designed by Johnathon Putrus Jr., a ninth-grader at Dakota High School in Macomb Township will be seen throughout Michigan during April's Distracted Driving Awareness Month. (Photo courtesy of TIA_

But once the Dakota High School ninth-grader started thinking about what the TIA was trying to do his focus changed and he became determined to create a design that would get people's attention while getting the message across.

"I wanted to design something that was clean, simple and elegant," Putrus added during Tuesday's press conference at his school announcing that his design along with one other, created by Brandy Cavanaugh, a ninth-grader at Mercy High School in Farmington Hills, were the contest winners.



Jim Santilli, CEO with the Transportation Improvement Association, displays the winning billboard design by Brandy Cavanaugh, a ninth-grader at Mercy High School in Farmington Hills. GINA JOSEPH – THE MACOMB DAILY

Through a \$40,000 grant provided by State Farm, TIA invited students to submit a billboard design. More than 60 entries were received from Michigan students, which were then judged by a selection committee that included leaders from TIA and law enforcement leaders from across the state.

It's been a year since Gov. Gretchen Whitmer signed into law a bill making it illegal to manually use a cell phone or other mobile electronic device while operating a vehicle on Michigan roads. Under the law a driver cannot hold or support a phone or other device with any part of their hands, arms or shoulders. Even if a cell phone or other device is mounted on a dashboard or connected to a vehicle's built-in system a driver cannot use their hands to operate it beyond a single touch.

Yet, drivers still do it.

In April 2023, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) released data for 2021 that illustrated traffic deaths due to distracted driving increased by 12 percent from the previous year.

In Michigan, TIA's preliminary numbers for 2023 showed 56 people were killed and 5,892 were injured in 15,136 motor vehicle crashes involving a distracted driver.

"These are not just numbers," said Jim Santilli, CEO of TIA and chairman of the Governor's Traffic Safety Advisory Commissions' Distracted Driving Action Team. "These are families who have been impacted."

"As a state, we need to say enough is enough," Santilli said to the crowd in attendance for Tuesday's event including Michigan State Police Lt. Mike Shaw, Macomb County Sheriff Anthony Wickersham, Chippewa Valley Superintendent Ron Roberts, Michigan State Sen. Veronica Klinefelt and Dakota High School students.

"Since crashes involving a distracted driver often rely on a thorough investigation or driver admission, we know the number of crashes involving a distraction is likely much higher," said

Wickersham. “The Macomb County Sheriff’s Office will continue to make traffic safety a top priority to ensure those traveling on our roads return home safely to their loved ones. I commend Johnathon Putrus Jr. and Brandy Cavanaugh for helping us save lives and prevent injuries.”

Their designs will be seen on billboards throughout the state during April’s National Driving Awareness Month including ones at M-59 and Romeo Plank Road, Interstate 94 at 14 Mile Road and along M-53.

“We are very proud of our student and his accomplishment,” said Roberts. “By having his design featured on this statewide campaign, Jonathan Putrus Jr. is using his creativity and artistic talent to affect change and provide awareness to a serious issue.”

“I think if you want young people to get the message — you need to involve young people in the solution,” he added.

Klinefelt concurred and applauded the TIA for its contest.

“I think any time we can come up with innovative ways to bring attention to distracted driving is a wonderful idea,” said Klinefelt, adding that she’s seen more than her share of distracted drivers during her drives to Lansing. “I think we have to keep reinforcing the message. I don’t know how much of this is covered in driving training, but I think it should be an important part of the curriculum.”

As for Putrus’ message?

It’s simple: “Phone Down, Law is Hands-Free Driving.”

Among the students who got it was Andrew Mossington, one of several students from Dakota High School Leadership group in attendance for the billboard design presentation despite the fact students were off for spring break.



Johnathan Putrus Jr., holds his certificate of recognition from the state, while surrounded by public safety leaders including Macomb County Sheriff Anthony Wickersham, far left, Sen. Veronica Klinefelt, TIA CEO Jim Santilli, Michigan State Police Lt. Mike Shaw and Superintendent of Chippewa Valley Schools Ron Roberts.
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“I assumed it would be good because he won,” said Mossington, adding the simple design makes it easily visible to anyone driving.

“I feel good about it,” said Putrus Jr., adding he hopes his friends and other students get the message. “They know not to text and drive but I don’t think they take the law seriously.”

In addition to the billboards, TIA is currently working with its law enforcement partners to develop distracted driving awareness materials officers can distribute during a traffic stop and community policing.

“Our hope is everyone across the great state of Michigan will do their part to end distracted driving,” said Santilli, which he called an addiction. “Lives depend on all of us making good choices when operating a motor vehicle.”