Students in Cochrane, ON, Winnipeg, MB, and more recently in Brantford, ON, have been given crash courses in rail safety as local railways, schools and communities staged mock crashes to change young people’s views of their life, and death!

It was a first for CN in Winnipeg, while Ontario Northland Railway in Cochrane embarked on its second venture in crash education. In February 2002 there had been three highway-railway collisions in one week in Cochrane. “That’s when I blew a gasket and was like, we’ve got to do something here,” said Mark Blanchette, crash organizer in Cochrane and signals maintainer at the ONR.

One accident was particularly serious, narrowly escaping the grave term used in railway statistics, ‘fatality.’ “He [the accident victim] was dragged 500 ft. down the track,” said Blanchette. “By the grace of God, it was not a fatality, but it should have been.” The area had not seen a death by train collision since 1996, when Blanchette’s former co-worker lost his teenaged daughter in a collision.

The railways stage these dramatic spectacles as a way of targeting a teen audience of up-and-coming drivers. “We wanted to have an impact on that age group, 16-17, who are just starting to drive, are getting into their late teens, and [are of the age] where alcohol is becoming a factor,” said Tom Bozyk, organizer of the mock crash in Winnipeg and a CN employee.

“They get to drive, and go out and party with their friends, so they were my primary target,” said Mark Blanchette.

Organizers at both railways involved a local high school drama class, having the young actors don fake blood and makeup to simulate some nasty injuries. Each actor had a specific role to play, the panicky shock victim, victims with broken bones and serious head injuries, and of course, the fatality.

Lorraine Viau of Jeunesse-Nord in Cochrane had the dramatically unchallenging role of the dead body. “They were trying to use me to show other people what could happen,” Viau said.

Viau’s role made her feel more than a little uncomfortable as she sat completely limp, trapped in a smashed-up car. “It felt so long in there, but really it was just a few minutes.” It was, “freaky,” she said, describing how the emergency responders put a tag on her, labelling her as the dead victim and resting her in front of the crowd with a blanket over her.

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It made her a little anxious hearing her friends involved in the performance, horrified and screaming her name at the top of their lungs. “It sort of wakes you up to the fact that this could really be happening.”

Using the students as the victims is part of the plan to really get the message through to the kids watching the crash. “This is what can happen if you and your friends aren’t careful,” said Blanchette. “I want to show the human cost,” he said.

“My friends nearly had tears in their eyes,” Viau said. “They told me that it had given them shivers, they were sort of scared, like this could really happen.” Viau’s friends weren’t the only ones who came away with a clear idea of what colliding with a train might actually mean. A program evaluation done by Transport Canada indicated that a good majority of the audience of 200 in Cochrane, “identified an enhanced awareness of the potential dangers of trains.”

The mock scenario was also designed to challenge emergency responders and help them hone their skills. It took five months to plan the crash in Winnipeg, said Bozyk. During that time, the organizers of the crash worked very closely with their local emergency responders figuring out ways that “they could use it [the mock crash] as a training tool.”

The emergency workers proved themselves well prepared for such an incident at both venues. “Their quality of response was amazing,” said Bozyk. “The emergency response team in Cochrane was equally impressive. They went through all the motions to make the crash seem as realistic as possible,” said Richard Gamble of ONR. “They came in as if it was a full-blown emergency. They used the Jaws of Life and cut the roof off the vehicle.”

“The more times they do this, the more it’s going to make them [students] realize how serious this is,” said Viau. Despite the positive feedback from the event, it’s tough to gauge the real success of the event, organizers from both crashes agreed. The job isn’t done until there are zero railway fatalities, said Gamble. Organizers in Cochrane are already considering putting on another mock crash, said Blanchette. “If there’s some good that can come out of this, then it’s worth it. I think if everybody gets out there, and they do it, Direction 2006’s goal to cut incidents in half is quite possible.”
In Brantford, Katie Miller got a lesson she’ll never forget. So did about 1,200 other students who participated in a mock car-train collision in front of their school, St. John’s College, on Paris Road.

“I’ve heard it from my parents so many times, ‘don’t drink and drive,’” said Miller, who had a bloodied face and shirt. “But I don’t think it really sunk in until now. I mean, I knew it was fake and everything, but still it was so real for me.”

She made the comments following a school assembly held after the mock disaster. Miller played the role of an impaired driver. She was transported from the crash in a police cruiser, and was marched into the gymnasium wearing handcuffs, escorted by police. The ride wasn’t fun and the cuffs hurt, she said.

Miller, a 16-year-old Grade 11 student, told the Brantford Expositor she doesn’t ever want to have that experience for real. Neither do any of the other participants. “They loaded me into the ambulance and left me there for a bit while they went to get other people,” said another student, Matt DaCosta, who was wheeled into the assembly on a stretcher, wearing a neck brace. “I had about 10 to 15 seconds alone in there and I was staring into the light and I just thought, ‘I’m not doing this, I don’t ever want to be here.’

Jenn Digiandomenico was brought into the assembly in a body bag. During the exercise, she was sprawled dead on the hood of the car in a pool of blood. It was an experience she wouldn’t wish on anybody. Perry Enyedi called it all unbelievable.

There have been several real pedestrian-train incidents and car-train collisions in front of St. John’s in recent years. In April 1992, four people died when a car collided with a train at the Hardy Road crossing. The car was pushed by the train until it came to a stop in front of St. John’s College. Since then, there have been other incidents involving pedestrians who were struck by a train in front of the school.

Back in the school for assembly, students listened carefully as emergency workers described their thoughts when they are responding to a disaster.

Fireman Grant Dix said he and other emergency workers have kids of their own. They also know a lot of kids through coaching local teams and other community activities. When they head to an accident scene, they wonder if it’s going to be one of their own or someone they know, Dix said. He and others told the students that disasters happen so quickly. “Play it safe because in a blink of an eye, it can change your life,” Dix said.
Tracy Emmons, a Brant County paramedic, told students that a real disaster is much more chaotic. And the consequences are fatal. “The survival rate is next to nil,” Emmons said. “You don’t get a second chance.”

St. John’s Principal Dina Dalia said it took three months and a lot of meetings to put the mock disaster together. But, she added, it was a very worthwhile endeavour. “Today is all about you,” she told the students. “It’s all about your safety, and helping you make good decisions about your safety.”