

Darien Woman Starts Local Effort to Get Drivers Off Phones

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Don't pick up that cell phone while you're driving — not to answer the phone or call on it and especially not to text.

Editor's note: An update (at the bottom of the article) has been added at 5:35 p.m. on Sept. 17.

We all know we shouldn't do any of that, and most of us are aware that it can be very dangerous, but Whitney Ball, a Darien mother of two, has an idea that she hopes will actually stop many of us from doing it — and make Darien a safer place to drive.

This summer, she came up with the idea of making "Drop It and Drive in Darien" car magnets available around town that can be put on the backs of cars. Ball had 250 of the magnets produced by an online store at her own expense.

"I think most of us can see it's a problem getting worse and worse," she said, referring to phone use by drivers. "Even hands-free [phone use] has a heightened level of risk. You can take someone else's life. [...] And it has such an easy fix, potentially."

The mother of a girl in the first grade and a boy in the fourth grade, Ball has had to stop at green lights as drivers go through while using cell phones. "It would be great if this is not an issue when they grow up," she said.

"I'm an issue-driven person and a safety-driven person," Ball said. She thinks a locally focused campaign to

change behavior in one community could get enough attention from drivers that it could be safer for everybody to drive in town.

"If I see this on every other car in Darien, and it's (the campaign) being run by a youth group in Darien — that would really be a success," Ball said. She hopes to bring up her campaign at Thursday night's Safe Rides meeting in Darien Town Hall.

The oval magnets (about five inches across) not only get the message to the driver behind you, they also make it a lot more embarrassing for you to pick up your mobile phone while behind the wheel.

Ball was born in Darien, moved away for about 20 years and returned to town about 10 years ago, she said. She has a background in nonprofit work and humanitarian causes.

In the past couple of weeks, Ball has started [a Facebook page](#) for the campaign, and she's been asking stores in town to make them available for a suggested donation of \$1.

The first store to carry them was Darien Toy Box at 1064 Post Road, where owner Bill Jensen was enthusiastic about the idea. Joe Warren, co-owner of Wild Birds Unlimited at 356 Heights Road, has also been a strong supporter.

You can also find the magnets at Healthy Child, a pediatric office at 745 Post Road, the UPS Store in Goodwives Shopping Center and at Barrett Bookstore, 314 Heights Road.

An anonymous donor bought up a number of the magnets and made 100 of them available at Darien Library, where you won't be asked to contribute a dollar.

The Darien Police Commission recently voted to endorse the idea, and Darien patrol cars have started sporting the stickers. The Depot youth center in Darien has also been supportive, Ball said.

"I'm just getting more and more fearful on the roads," Ball said [in an interview](#) with Jim Cameron on Darien TV79's "Community Matters" show. "My hope is that the town of Darien can own this as an issue and that we can say — at least on this small, local level, 'We're not going to accept this because we know the dangers are so extreme when one chooses, especially, to text.'"

Statistics from the [Distraction.gov](#) website:

- In 2013, 3,154 people were killed in motor vehicle crashes involving distracted drivers. This represents a 6.7 percent decrease in the number of fatalities recorded in 2012. Unfortunately, approximately 424,000 people were injured, which is an increase from the 421,000 people who were injured in 2012.

- 10% of drivers of all ages under the age of 20 involved in fatal crashes were reported as distracted at the time of the crash. This age group has the largest proportion of drivers who were distracted.
- Drivers in their 20s make up 27 percent of the distracted drivers in fatal crashes.

Update, 5:35 p.m.: Darien police issued an announcement (full announcement at the bottom of this article) about Whitney Ball's "Drop It and Drive: campaign.

Here's an updated list of places where you can get the car magnets for a \$1 donation:

- Darien Police Department – 25 Hecker Ave.
- Darien Town Hall - Renshaw Road
- Darien Library - 1441 Post Road
- Depot Teen Center - 25 Heights Road
- Barrett Book Store - 314 Heights Road
- UPS Store - 25 Old Kings Hwy. N.
- Wild Birds Unlimited - 356 Heights Road
- The Healthy Child - 745 Post Road

Here's the entire Darien Police Department announcement, issued Thursday:

The Darien Police Department has joined Darien native Whitney Ball, in her campaign effort to end distracted driving in the community.

Distracted driving is any non-driving activity that takes the driver's eyes off the road, hands off the wheel or interrupts concentration while driving that increases the risk of crashing. The most prevalent of these behaviors is the use of a cell phone to either text or make phone calls.

Frustrated by how often she has observed these violations, Ball felt compelled to increase public awareness in the community of the dangers of distracted driving. In achieving this, she also hopes to promote responsible driving habits through education and community engagement.

According to Ball, "Using a multi-tiered community wide approach involving the police department and politicians," we can come together as a town and recognize how dangerous this is and prevent tragedy before it has a chance to occur.

In early August Ball paid to have vehicle magnets created that displayed the message “Drop It & Drive In Darien.” With hopes to expand upon her campaign, she approached the Darien Police Department Traffic Division which has been assisting ever since.

Over the past several weeks, The Darien Police Commission has enthusiastically endorsed the use of the magnets on all of the marked patrol vehicles and the Darien Police Association has made a donation to have more magnets created.

In the future Ball would like to see all of the municipal vehicles in town displaying the message, but for now she is pleased with the campaign’s progress. Acknowledging that the campaign was initiated by her, she hopes that it can grow far beyond just magnets and that more people and organizations get involved.

She envisions a larger marketing effort and the implementation of educational programs in schools at various levels. “We hope that by creating this visible statement - and encouraging drivers to make a personal pledge to be safer on the roads - our whole community will be safer, in turn.”

For a minimum donation of \$1.00, magnets can be obtained at the following distribution points:

- Darien Police Department – 25 Hecker Ave.
- Darien Town Hall - Renshaw Road
- Darien Library - 1441 Post Road
- Depot Teen Center - 25 Heights Road
- Barrett Book Store - 314 Heights Road

Darienite

News for Darien

<http://darienite.com>

- UPS Store - 25 Old Kings Hwy. N.
- Wild Birds Unlimited - 356 Heights Road
- The Healthy Child - 745 Post Road

Donations to the campaign can also be made by contacting Whitney Ball at dropitanddrive@outlook.com.