

## **JUST THINK FIRST**

*"Character Education at Wakefield High School is linked to our past and to our students' personal experiences." (Dr. Vivian Wells, Assistant Principal)*

### **Background and Demographics**

Situated on a 110-acre tract of land in northern Wake County, Wakefield High School opened its doors in the fall of 2000. The elementary, middle and high schools are adjacent to each other and centrally located in the Wakefield community. Housing approximately 2500 students with a freshmen facility located 3 miles from main campus, the high school offers a traditional curriculum based on the NC Standard Course of Study. There is also a strong program in the arts. Student life is thriving and there are numerous opportunities to become involved in clubs, service organizations, and student government. Recognized as an academic *School of Distinction*, Wakefield has also won honors and awards in athletics, including two state titles in boys' basketball, three in girls' track, and this year in 2013, the state volleyball championship. A typical large suburban high school; the student body at Wakefield is close and the parents and community are supportive and involved.

### **Tragedy Can Happen**

Despite all of this, Wakefield has suffered an alarming number of student deaths due to drug trafficking, speed racing, and drinking and driving in the past. Between 2005 and 2007, nine students died. One student, an Eagle Scout and former member of the high school band, was found dead in the trunk of his car after his first year of college. He had been duct-taped and set on fire...murdered because of a drug deal gone bad. Eight students died in five separate automobile accidents and sadly, more students have been left permanently impaired in additional accidents. As a result of poor decisions, one single driving accident took the lives of four senior boys who were returning home from a regional basketball play-off game. This particular accident received much media attention; but it was all of the accidents and the loss of so many young lives in less than 24 months time that put the Wakefield community in a state of shock and disbelief.

### **We Chose to Take Action**

Determined to take action and call attention to teen choices and teen driving practices, the school and the PTSA implemented a day-long program and school-wide assembly in spring 2006 called *Alive at 25*. Developed precisely because of the high incidence of traffic fatalities that occur among young people today, the *Alive at 25 Program* targets the importance of safe driving and passenger behaviors. The hope was that this particular program would impact our students, causing them simply to "just think first" before getting behind the wheel of a car or getting into a car with a driver who is impaired.

### **Community Support and the JUST THINK FIRST Videos**

Many organizations and people from around the state and local community reached out to Wakefield after the deaths of our students offering support and assistance with money, time, materials, and programs. We received a grant from the Wake County New Vehicle Dealers' Association and working in conjunction with this group, the school and the PTSA produced a first documentary entitled *JUST THINK FIRST: choices count*. We released this documentary in spring 2007 and provided copies to all school systems in North Carolina. The JUST THINK FIRST Program was officially born at this point in time. While driving was the subject of this first video, teen drug use was the subject of the second video we produced. The third video is currently in production and a number of Wakefield students are involved. The topic of our 3<sup>rd</sup> video is *bullying*. Viewers immediately recognize that the stories from our videos are "real," noting that they share what has happened to real people; rather, teens who were attending high school. As a teaching tool, this fact is compelling, and the lessons we are teaching about *choice, personal responsibility and respect for others* are greatly enhanced.

### **Continuing the Fight**

The mission of The JUST THINK FIRST Program is to raise awareness on various topics that affect teens in society today including violence, sex, drugs, alcohol, gangs, bullying and negative peer pressure. Through education, we provide powerful messages to our students regarding the responsible choices they can make. Wakefield's 2 races, *The 5-K Road Race & Skinny Turkey Half Marathon*, held on Thanksgiving Day each year, provide financial support and recognition for the program. In 2013 we had over 1700 participants. JUST THINK FIRST brings nationally known speakers and groups to campus, awards scholarships, and we regularly distribute memorabilia to our students such as bracelets, buttons and t-shirts... all the while, keeping the focus and goals of the program in the forefront of their high school experiences.

### **The JUST THINK FIRST Club**

The JUST THINK FIRST Club is a large organization on campus and student ambassadors are active throughout the year. JTF Ambassadors were instrumental in helping the school win \$25,000 in State Farm's Celebrate My Drive Contest (Fall 2013.) They also helped with the Thanksgiving Day races and are currently carrying out assignments related to the new video project. JTF programs are insightful and impactful and they link us to our school's history. The club promotes the principles of the over-arching JUST THINK FIRST organization; ultimately, serving as a cultural and character-based "reality check" for our students.