

Class helps young driver

Minneapolis teen enrolls to build confidence lost in crash

By John Molene

TIMES STAFF WRITER

Brittany Nelson-Cheeseman is eager for more time on the skid course.

"Can I do this again?" she asks Larry Ouellette, one of the instructors

at the Minnesota Highway Safety Center in St. Cloud.

"As many times as you want," Ouellette answers.

Nelson-Cheeseman of Minneapolis is serious about learning all she can at the advanced driving skills class. A year ago she was the driver in an accident in which one of her friends was killed.

Again and again the 17-year-old aims the late-model recycled police cruiser down the driving range straight-away,

building up speed and then hitting the skid pad.

"Confidence," Nelson-Cheeseman answered when asked what she hoped to gain. "That's like a big thing for me."

Confidence is what they teach in the highway center course. It's something that has been in short supply for Nelson-Cheeseman the last 10 months.

Fifteen years old, with a brand-new learner's permit, she was driving her friend's Toyota truck on a pleasant spring night with four friends aboard.

St. Cloud Times 5A

start over after fatality

"I wanted to drive and try out my permit experience," Nelson-Cheeseman said.

But something went wrong. Driving just 45 mph at about 10:30 p.m., she lost control of the truck. It skidded and plowed into a retaining wall, sending three of her friends to the pavement. Two were injured. A third landed on his head and was killed.

"I turned the wheel and it started kicking and swerving and hit the wall," Nelson-Cheeseman recalled. "I

put my head down, and I don't even remember hitting the wall."

Nelson-Cheeseman said she wasn't under the influence of alcohol or drugs at the time of the accident. "It was just a stupid mistake. I didn't drive for six months afterward."

She is taking the driving skills course to make sure something like that never happens again. And that's what the highway safety center is all about.

"I honestly have the opinion I save

lives," said Dave Schultz, director of the driving facility. "And if I have saved one life in 26 years, it's worth it."

Halfway through the day's lessons, Nelson-Cheeseman already has learned a lot.

"I just looked at it and ran it right over," she said of a plastic highway cone on the evasive steer course.

"I'm very cautious now," Nelson-Cheeseman added. "It makes you think twice about speeding. Out there, you think 30 (mph) is nothing."