

# SWR student wins state essay contest

**By Tony Bolick**  
The Courier-Tribune

**A S H E B O R O** — Southwestern Randolph High School's Hunter Epps was one of two to earn top honors in the North Carolina Governor's Highway Safety Program's Spring Scholar-Athlete essay contest. In addition to Epps, Lauryn Taylor of Green Level High School was the other top winner.

And he has first-hand knowledge related to the use of seat belts and what that means. He was the driver in an accident in January that involved two cars. The incident was relatively minor and he walked away unharmed, thanks to wearing his seat belt. That experience also gave him an understanding of what



**Epps**

that seat belt could mean in a more violent, high-speed crash.

In his essay, Epps explains that a great way to spread the organization's Click It or Ticket message means taking advantage of using the most popular social media platforms popular among teens like Instagram, YouTube and TikTok.

"I know how important seat belts are. They save lives and prevent bad injuries," Epps said. "I also know how important Instagram and TikTok are to teenagers. We use it everyday, especially now while in quarantine."

Epps detailed in his essay how the program could

produce lots of short videos to reach out to teens on those platforms to spread the message. He researched the Governor's Highway Safety Program website and saw many videos about crashes, graphics and re-enactments around the seat belt campaign. Getting those in shorter formats and out to social media platforms would be a good way to reach their target audience. Epps added getting students to take part in some would add to the power of that message.

"I looked on the website and saw they had graphics and images, showing car wrecks," he said. "They could produce some of those ... I talked about producing videos that had first responders and police officers ... to show high school students what could happen

through actor portrayal."

But that's not all. Epps added the counter argument. He spoke about the reasons he heard from students about why they don't wear them: hearing seatbelts could harm them or they were very uncomfortable. Those could also be addressed in short-form videos.

A panel of judges went through the essay entries to determine the best selections of those competing in originality, content, organization and grammar in addressing how, as a student-athlete, the authors could motivate their peers to buckle through a social media program and also, what would their message be to them.

Epps is now a senior at SWR and plays on the Cougars' tennis team.