

MADD's recommendation draws criticism

By Casey Hans
staff writer

Monday was the first time Oakland County representatives from MADD — Mothers Against Drunk Driving — were invited to share their feelings at a sentencing involving a drunk driving case in Oakland County Circuit Court, according to member Greg Blen.

But Greg and Penny Blen's attendance and their three-page letter sent to the court — several days before sentencing — drew criticism

from the bench, as Oakland County Circuit Court Judge Norman Lippitt prepared to sentence Laura Pinis, 24, of Birmingham, for negligent homicide in the deaths of Vanessa and Lara Carloni of West Bloomfield Township. The sisters were killed in March 1985 when the vehicle in which they were riding was hit head-on by Pinis' vehicle.

Penny Blen, current president of the Oakland County MADD Chapter, and her husband Greg co-authored a letter to Lippitt, voicing their disagreement with his verdict for Pinis,

who received two years' probation and a six-month work release jail sentence for her part in the Carloni deaths.

"We do not agree with your decision to reduce the original charges from manslaughter to negligent homicide and dropping the felonious driving charges entirely," the letter said. "If we grant drunk drivers the assumption that they 'didn't know any better' because they were too drunk, we can forget the progress that has been made in the last five years and let the carnage on the

highway continue unchecked."

The Blens said there were "very good reasons for giving severe sentences for crime such as this," and spoke of the "callous disregard of the victims in the judicial process."

LIPPITT SPOKE directly to the Blens preceding his sentencing, saying that "personal loss must add to your zealotness" and that he "can't personally feel the hurt and sorrow." The Blens lost a son to a drunk driver.

But the judge took exception to

what he felt were strong words in the Blens' letter. "I do not oppose your right to come before the court," he said, "but I do resent some of the things set forth in this letter. I resent the attack on me and my colleagues and the fairest system of justice on this globe."

"You have no right to tell this court how to decide a case, or to interfere with a decision."

Greg Blen felt "we were brought up here to be spanked publicly," and said he doesn't understand how their

letter interfered in the judicial system.

"He invited our input," he added. "I don't see why we got that kind of a blast. What I was trying to do was give him a victim's perspective of what happened."

The Blens said they have written letters in the past, but have never received such a response. They are attempting to set up a meeting with Lippitt to discuss the situation, and possible repercussions to future drunk driving cases and the involvement of the MADD organization.



Two West Bloomfield sisters were killed while riding in this car on Farmington Road, south of 14 Mile, in March 1985.

Woman sentenced in fatal crash

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involving a drunk driver.

She asked the court to consider that "drunk driving is not an accident, but a choice" and called for "at least a year in the county jail" for Pinis.

Blen said she was "very disappointed" after the sentencing and that she "didn't feel the victims were given a fair shake."

A letter written to Lippitt after his verdict by Blen and her husband, Greg Blen, drew harsh, verbal criticism from the judge for their disagreement with his findings in the case.

FOLLOWING A non-jury trial, Lippitt found Pinis not guilty of manslaughter charges and convicted her of negligent homicide. In addition to probation and jail time, Pinis

will pay \$400 in court costs and serve a minimum of 200 hours of community service work, according to Lippitt's sentence.

The maximum allowable on a negligent homicide conviction is up to two years in jail, Lippitt said. Under the work-release program, Pinis will serve her time in the Oakland County Jail on nights and weekends.

Pinis told the court before her sentencing she was "very sorry" and added, "I too have suffered physically as well as emotionally" because of the incident.

During his sentencing, Lippitt said he did not believe she would repeat her actions, and called the incident "an isolated but fateful act."

"Ms. Pinis, there's no question... you were drunk," the judge said. "I did not permit sympathy for the victims or prejudice for you to influence my decision."

"You are a person who has made a horrible mistake."

Pinis was also injured in the March 1985 accident as were Southfield residents Brian Smith, then 17, and driver of the LeCar, and Michael Altman, who was 16 at the time of the collision and a passenger with the Carloni sisters.

Charles Sirols of Southfield, 24 at the time of the collision and a passenger in Pinis' car, was treated for a broken arm at Botsford General Hospital in Farmington Hills and released, according to police reports.

All blood test results from the accident were returned negative, except for Pinis', according to police, who declined to reveal her blood alcohol level. Sirols was not tested, since he was not driving; no hospital blood records were available.

Juan and Beatriz Carloni have one other child — a son, Alex. Juan Carloni is an area physician.

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