

Starting the new year off safely

MADD, WOMC offer free cab rides home for over-imbibers

BY DARR PETER TEMPLETON
STAFF WRITER

Having a few drinks can be a great way to welcome the new year, even if some of the revelers do enjoy the party a bit too much.

To ensure the celebration doesn't end in tragedy, celebrants across Oakland County can catch a free cab ride home compliments of WOMC (104.3 on the FM dial) and MADD.

"We had over 600 calls last year and over 700 rides another year," said Michele Compton, Chapter Administrator of Mothers Against Drunk Driving of Oakland County.

"Project Life Ride" is marking their 16th year offering cabs home to those who indulge on New Year's Eve.

WOMC will be footing the bill for the rides, provided by 30 different cab companies, as the station has done for many years. In addition AT&T is providing MADD with a toll free number for callers in need and a telemarketing firm donated use of their offices as a phone bank, Compton said.

A press conference Tuesday

announced the annual project and included appearances by MADD members, officers from the Oakland County Sheriff's Department and Prosecutor David Goreyca.

"This is a safe and inexpensive way to make New Year's Eve night a safe one," said Goreyca. "And Project Life Ride has been a very successful program. There have been no fatalities in the tri-county area on New Year's Eve the last three years."

Credit for that impressive statistic goes right to the county MADD Chapter, "a wonderful organization," according to Frank Cardimen, president of Traffic Improvement Association (TIA) of Oakland County.

The TIA keeps data on traffic incidents in the county and helps support the efforts of local police agencies who man the roads. In early 1998 TIA received a \$60,000 grant from the Michigan Office of Highway Safety Planning and a portion is utilized for additional law enforcement manning during the holidays.

The money is divided up between several police agencies who take part in a

county based group called Drive Oakland Safely. The co-op includes Oakland County Sheriff's Department and police departments from Troy, Pontiac, Southfield, Farmington Hills and Waterford.

"The money is used in different ways during different times of the year but the majority is to put additional manpower on the road and to support MADD's efforts during the holidays," Cardimen said.

Barnett Jones, Captain of Protective Services for the Oakland County Sheriff's Department, agreed the holidays produce more offenders but said the county has an alcohol enforcement unit on the job all year long.

"Our officers are always concerned with the safety and welfare of others, and if the drivers are out there we'll find them and arrest them, make no bones about it," Jones said.

The holiday atmosphere produces many first time offenders who get caught up in the celebrating and think they can still drive even after enjoying lots of beverages, he added.

"You don't have to be falling down drunk to be over the limit in this state,"

Jones said.

In fact, many times it's the person who is functioning in a somewhat normal manner that ends up being the one who's had too much and will be careless while driving, he said.

"That's why there's a big push to lower the limit from .10 to .08, and I would be in favor of that," Jones said.

"And driving drunk is an equal opportunity decision. Just as many women as males go out and do it."

Party hosts should also consider the liability factor when letting guests indulge in heavy drinking at their homes. Homeowners can be liable for people who leave their home drunk and get into accidents, Jones said there are also "vicarious liability suits" that see a party host sued for letting someone leave their home intoxicated even if they weren't serving any alcohol.

"We are the most suit-conscious country on the earth, so people have to be careful," Jones said.

Local restaurants and bars do the best they can not to serve intoxicated people for the same reason, Jones

said.

At Mr. B's in Clarkston staff are happy to help their over celebrating patrons get home safely. Manager Lorraine Middler feels the free cab service offered up by MADD is a good idea. It's something they would suggest to their patrons or dial up for a customer upon request.

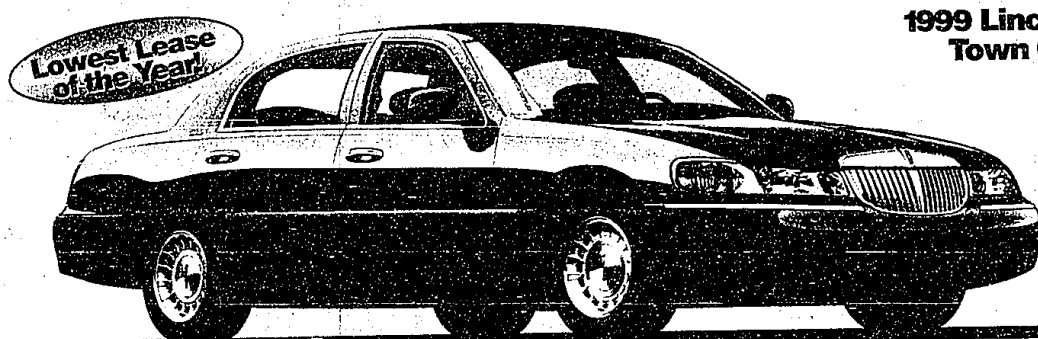
"We would definitely do it (call a cab) if we needed to," Middler said, noting that it's always standard procedure, any night of the year, to stop serving those patrons who seem to be intoxicated.

"You can get intoxicated, that's your choice, but don't get behind the wheel of a car," Jones said. "We have a very serious attitude about it."

"They can make the choice of drinking and calling for a ride or drinking and driving and going to the Nichols, Fienno or Hockell Hilton for the night," added Goreyca. "The choice to call Project Life Ride could be the ride of their life."

The number to call for a free cab ride home beginning at 9 p.m. tonight and until 5 a.m. tomorrow is (877) FOR-MADD or (877) 367-6233.

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