

MADD's focus: drunk driving laws

Existing state laws are still too lenient for drunken drivers, according to Oakland County MADD director Greg Bien.

Penalties are more severe than they used to be, Bien acknowledged, thanks in part to growing public sentiment fueled by MADD.

"Many drunk drivers who killed people used to avoid jail," he said. "Judges reasoned that since they didn't intend to kill anybody, drunk drivers shouldn't go to jail."

That's changed since MADD started following court cases and calling public attention to judges who let drunks off with the proverbial slap

on the wrist.

If a drunk driver kills somebody now, he or she can expect at least some jail time, Bien said.

Even so, state laws are still too lenient on drinking drivers, he insisted. "The penalty should be commensurate with the pain they (drunk drivers) inflict on others."

Furthermore, drinking drivers should face tougher laws long before they kill somebody, he said.

"THE LEGAL LIMIT (on Breathalyzer tests, now .10) should be lowered to .08," Bien said. "And

drivers should lose their license the minute it's determined they were behind the wheel and drunk."

"They shouldn't have time to appeal their suspension. Their licenses should be yanked immediately," he said. "For a minimum of 30 days. Longer for second offenders."

"If somebody kills another person while driving drunk, he or she should lose their driving privileges permanently," Bien said.

Bien said he and other MADD members feel the tide of public opinion swinging in their favor, against the drunk driver. "The only people against us are the defense attorneys who resent what we're doing."

"They (defense attorneys) will take a member of Itell's Angels and make him look like a choir boy when he's in court," Bien said. "But they claim we intimidate a jury simply because we're in the courtroom."

The bottom line of MADD's effectiveness is the number of drunk drivers on the road, he said.

According to the Traffic Services Division of the Michigan State Police, the number of drivers in Oakland County arrested for DUI (driving under the influence of liquor) has been relatively constant since 1983, the first full year of the county chapter of MADD existed, despite the

fact that more people now live and work in Oakland County.

THERE WERE 7,411 DUI arrests in 1983, according to state police records; 8,400 in 1984; 7,961 in 1985; 7,501 in 1986; 7,232 in 1987; 7,900 in 1988, and 6,766 in the first 10 months of this year.

Bien is encouraged by the numbers, given the area's rapid growth and, presumably, the increase number of vehicles. "If we've got more cars on the road traveling more miles, it's a victory to stay even," he said.

A more encouraging statistic, however, may be the percentage of fatal accidents which were alcohol-related. It has been steadily dropping, according to the state police, if ever so slightly.

In 1983, the percentage of Oakland County fatal accidents involving alcohol was 37.5. It was 30.8 in 1984; 42.1 in 1985; 57.9 in 1986; 42.7 in 1987, and 45.4 in 1988 (the last figures available).

"I don't know that MADD is responsible," said Bien. "Either way, we can do better. We can make people realize that drinking and driving are not acceptable."

Anyone interested in helping can call the MADD office at 693-0276.

Ribbon campaign 'making an impact'

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Penny Bien, a former teacher at Oxford High School, remains active in MADD and is chairman of this year's "Tie One On" campaign.

While their involvement in MADD is consuming, Bien said it goes beyond personal grief.

"It's not just for my daughter," Bien emphasized. "I've had other kids die because of drinking and driving."

Bien, a science and math teacher, was referring to three former students who died separately — or killed themselves — in alcohol related traffic accidents.

THE MADD AGENDA, of course, is to reduce the number of traffic deaths related to alcohol.

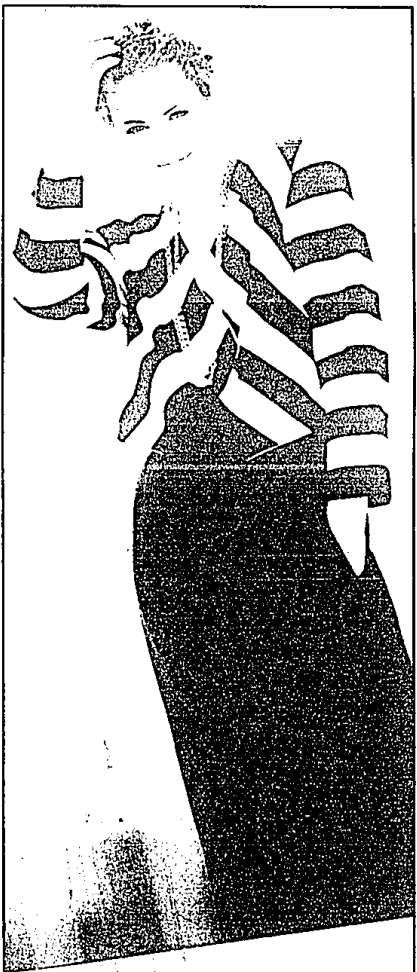
"We're not necessarily against all drinking," emphasized Bien, who said he has an occasional glass of wine with dinner or a champagne toast at a wedding, about the same as before his daughter was killed.

"Drinking is legal," Bien said. "Although some MADD members want to crusade against all alcohol, we're not some kind of Carry Nation organization."

Nation was a famous temperance reformer in the late 1890s and early 1900s.

"We want people to be responsible," said Bien, a graduate of Brother Rice High School and Oakland University. "If you drink, don't drive."

"If you drink and drive, be ready to take the consequences."



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