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Fighting MADD

By: JON HALBERG, Gazette Staff Writer September 24, 2001

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Group's Indiana chapter gets new lease on life.

From left: MADD speaker Sharon Zimmerman of Armagh; King Stumpp, executive director of The Open Door; and Sgt. Guy Haberl, MADD coordinator. (Gazette photo by [Jamie Isenberg](#))

Sharon Zimmerman of Armagh speaks about the crash as if it happened just yesterday.

"I was just getting ready to go out the door to work, and the phone rang," Zimmerman says. "It was somebody saying my son's friend had been in a car accident."

Zimmerman, whose 16-year-old son, Todd, was staying at the friend's house, couldn't understand what she'd heard.

She didn't know it yet, but early that morning she had become one of an average of nine American mothers a day who lose a teen-age son or daughter to alcohol-related crashes.

Her son had gotten a ride to a party along with the friend, and was one of two passengers killed when the driver wrecked the car.

"The newspaper printed the blood alcohol content of the driver, but it's not news that my son's was 0.0," Zimmerman said. "Everyone always assumes that because my son was with them, that he'd been drinking, too."

Now Zimmerman, one of nearly 3 million members of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, is a mom with a mission: to share the story of how she lost her son in 1995. She hopes to make a difference so that more mothers won't have to experience what she's gone through.

"I can tell you, it never goes away," said Zimmerman. "People who use the word 'closure,' they're people that aren't dealing with this."

Indiana's MADD chapter, which officially formed in January after being dormant for more than five years, is the way for



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her to make a difference, according to King Stumpp, executive director of The Open Door, a drug and alcohol outpatient treatment center in Indiana.

Stumpp said an average of 400 to 450 people a year who are convicted of driving under the influence come to The Open Door for state-required safe-driving classes. He said Zimmerman and others from the local MADD chapter who've lost family members will likely tell their stories in future classes.

READER POLL

What should be done with the Pledge of Allegiance

and the phrase "under God?"
E-mail us with your comments.

- Leave it as it is
- Remove the phrase, but keep the pledge
- Leave the phrase in, but make the pledge optional
- If the phrase remains, remove the pledge from public schools

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"You're taking about 400 DUI people a year and putting them in front of people who have been impacted by drunk driving," said Stumpp. "It makes a profound impact."

Sgt. Guy Haberl of the Indiana Borough Police Department is the MADD coordinator here. According to Haberl, MADD has been sorely missed in the five years it's been absent from the Indiana scene.

"We received word from people here who'd been involved with MADD before - they were very, very happy it's going again," Haberl said.

He mentioned a Sept. 13 incident, in which a man accused of driving under the influence ran a stop sign and totaled a borough police car, as proof positive of a major drinking-and-driving problem. He said it's not just here but nationwide.

"If you talk to almost any police officer with time on the job, they'll tell you either they've been hit by a drunk driver or they've come close," Haberl said.

The Open Door provided a place for a local MADD victim's hot line, (724) 349-MADD, which started operating just this month. The hot line is a place for families of victims of drunken drivers to call for help, according to Haberl.

With funding for the phone line provided by the William G. Mechling Insurance Agency and the phone and answering machine coming from The Office Outlet, Haberl said a lot of people and businesses in the community wanted to get involved in MADD's rebirth here.

He said Zimmerman told him an Indiana MADD chapter was really needed - something she wanted to be involved in.

"It was the call I'd been waiting for," Zimmerman agreed.

"I'm amazed it's taken off like it has so far," said District Attorney Bob Bell, who encouraged Haberl and others to try to get the group going again to deal with the drunken-driving problem. Bell said about half of his office's 1,300 cases a year involve DUI charges.

According to Bell, MADD members are already involved with the family in a pending case involving the death of a 10-year-old girl and will be at the preliminary hearing this week.

Along with MADD, The Open Door and state and local police agencies, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation is making major efforts to eliminate drunken driving locally and statewide, said Sean Houck, safety press officer with PennDOT in Indiana, Armstrong, Jefferson, Butler and Clarion counties.



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Billboards warning drinking drivers that state troopers are hunting for them, as well as billboards showing the victims of DUI accidents, are a few of the ways PennDOT is trying to stop the problem, Houck said.

"MADD's role is basically - they're the voice of the victims," Houck said. "If there's an incident where someone has been drinking and killed someone on the roadway, they can speak up if they think a sentence is not harsh enough or make sure the court understands that this victim now has children that are left without a mother or a father."

Zimmerman, along with other victims of DUI crashes, will speak Oct. 1 at 6 p.m. at the Hadley Union Building on the Indiana University of Pennsylvania campus, as part of a lecture series there. It is open to the public.

According to Zimmerman, speaking to others is something she does to educate people who don't understand what kind of danger is involved in drinking and driving. Still, she said, it doesn't help her come to terms with the loss of her son.

"Every year on his birthday, you wonder, now my son would be 22 ... how tall would he be?" Zimmerman said. "My God, he was 16. He was a little boy. He didn't even shave yet."

"Such a destructive, shocking thing to have done to my son; it's brought my family to their knees."

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