

Married with children

Fatal DUI wreck stirs a mother's emotions

There is a family in Oak Park, Ill., grieving as the new year begins.

There is a family in Wadsworth, Ohio, who had an empty place at the dinner table this holiday season.

There is a community in Oxford, Ohio, which lost two young women in love with life and in the prime of their lives.

The families and the Miami University friends who claimed these women as members are learning, in the harshest way possible, about the costs of drunken driving.

Elizabeth Caden, from Wadsworth, and Tiffany Painter, from Oak Park, were killed Nov. 30 when their car was hit by a pickup truck going the wrong way on Interstate 75.

The driver of the truck, a 78-year-old man who was badly injured in the wreck, was drunk, news reports said.

Somebody's daughters died because someone else chose to drive while drunk.

Somebody's friends are gone because a man took to the wheel so intoxicated he drove the wrong direction on the interstate.

The news hit Miami like a sharp punch to the belly. The girls' story and pictures drew front-page coverage. Students devoured every detail and despaired.

Two of my students were close friends with Elizabeth and Tiffany.

One was in the caravan on I-75, heading south for a weekend in Gatlinburg, Tenn., while the other

stayed back to study on the dorm floor they all shared. Both, shaken to the core, fought to keep their composure as they explained their absences from class and told me about the accident.

I was sickened. Two young women, smiling and shining in front-page pictures, gone.

Two young women — girls who didn't have an enemy, girls who lit up any room they entered, their friends said — killed by another driver's supreme stupidity.

If Elizabeth Caden or Tiffany Painter were my daughter, I don't know if I could stand the pain. I don't know if I could contain the rage. I don't know that I could do anything else with the rest of my life but wage war on those who choose to drive while drunk. Just knowing these girls

through my students gave me the smallest taste of the desperation their own families must be feeling.

And it made me think, hard, about the times I or my husband have gone to parties or visited bars and then gotten behind the wheel.

"Are you OK to drive?" I have asked my spouse.

"Do you want me to drive?" I, also having had a few, have asked.

We go out much less these days, of course, and we drink much less, too, than when we were younger and childless. But that hardly matters. We have consumed alcohol, we have driven and we have created an opportunity for tragedy.

The statistics remain sobering, even 20 years after this country began to crack down on drunken driving: About one in 10 Americans will be involved

in an alcohol-related crash in their lives; about 38 percent of all fatal crashes involve alcohol; the problem gets worse on Christmas, New Year's, Super Bowl Sundays and other "drinking occasions."

So while deaths tied to drunken driving have fallen by more than 40 percent since 1980 — so says Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), which supplied the other figures as well — the progress has reached a plateau in the last few years.

In 2000, the percentage of fatal crashes linked to drinking rose, to 40 percent from 38 a year earlier.

If I lost a child to a drunken driver, I wouldn't quite know what to make of the numbers.

I might disregard them, wanting to hold onto my child as an individual rather than as part of a sad

national trend. I might embrace them as a call to join the MADD movement against drunken driving.

Since I haven't lost a child, I'll simply reflect on other families' losses.

I'll think about whether I or my spouse have put ourselves or our children in jeopardy by driving after drinking.

I'll consider whether we've put other cars on the road in harm's way.

I'll ponder whether too many of our special occasions have become drinking — then driving — occasions.

I'll think about Elizabeth Caden and Tiffany Painter and decide not to take any risk of adding to their numbers.

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