

Matthew Kato Memorial Scholarship

I have been enormously aware of the perils of drinking and driving my whole life. It was mandated information since Elementary school. The "DAR.E." shirts were our proof of acknowledgement and understanding of the concept. Lectures of its dangers became routine. We were aware of what and what not to do. However by no means did I imagine that it would occur so close to me and it's repercussions are eternal.

The introduction of high school only exacerbated the temptations. The pressures we had only heard about were finally happening to us. Even so, no matter how great the enticement may be, I will *never* drive under the influence. My best friend's life was taking away because someone decided to risk it all, however it was my friend who had to incur the loss. Why did *he* have to accept the consequences that came out of a selfish man's actions?

It never hits you until something happens. Something earth shattering, groundbreaking; it hits you. When you're a teenager you completely isolate yourself from the concept of death and it's totally unfamiliar. Driving under the influence has a definite correlation with irresponsibility. Due to someone's unreliability, a boy, a completely innocent boy won't be able to walk the stage for graduation. He won't be able to laugh about simple things, or be his brother's best man. He won't be able to experience the small aspects of life. Smelling, breathing; just being alive. Many people do not think of these things when they open the car door stumbling. They just don't. Most will say they believe they can control themselves and drive after drinking but I would like to see them explain themselves to a family who had just lost a member because he "thought" they would drive fine.

In 2002, an estimated 17,419 people died in alcohol related traffic crashes, an alarming average of one every 30 minutes. Also, about three in every ten Americans *will* be involved in an alcohol related accident at some time in their lives. If 97% of the population is extremely afraid of their personal safety, and these alarming statistics are definite, why does it continue to happen? Why do lives have to be taken away almost every minute of the day because we refuse to do something about it?

It's not that we want to live in a world where driving to the store might be the last thing we do, it's just we cannot control what people want to do. If people desire to drive after they have been drinking, it is their choice. That does not however mean we as a state have not tried to stop it. New York State developed the New York State Special Traffic Options Program for Driving While Intoxicated. Prior to the establishment of

STOP-DWI, the average person arrested for driving while intoxicated had a blood alcohol concentration level of .19, almost twice the legal limit, yet their chances of being arrested were estimated to be one in two thousand. Most drunk drivers had their charges reduced to non-alcohol related charges and the average fine was \$11.00, and at the same time, alcohol related fatalities were at a high 44.14%. The program was developed in 1980 in a strong effort to dramatically decrease alcohol related fatalities and injuries. The primary objective was to ensure that proper legislation would be enacted for the future foundation of effective local programs. The program increased its maximum \$50 fine to a new minimum mandatory fine of \$250. A conviction for DWI was raised to a minimum fine of \$300 and a maximum fine of \$500 in hopes of deterring future drunk drivers. All counties in New York State have their own STOPDWI Program, and their successes are proved in their numbers. Alcohol related crashes decreased from 16,607 in 1981 to 10,167 in 2000. Fatalities have declined from 1,107 in 1981 to 334 in 2000. The state fines collected went from less than \$500,000 annually to an astounding average of \$22 million.

The local approach to eradicating DWI seems to be working however; we will not attain complete justice until it is diminished entirely, which in itself is an empty hope. Unless people begin to accept their responsibility as drivers, and as humans, lives will continue to be taken away unjustly. Nevertheless, those who are aware of the dangers can continue to do well and do their part in ending reckless driving under the influence and preserving lives.