

For MADD, the Legal Drinking Age Is Not Up for Debate

By ERIC HOOVER

Statistics can tell you a lot, but statistics do not grieve. That was the power of a group of activists who emerged in the early 1980s. They called themselves Mothers Against Drunk Driving, and they described what numbers alone could not.

MADD's members cried before judges, legislators, and television cameras. They publicized the pain of losing sons and daughters in alcohol-related traffic accidents.

They even persuaded President Ronald Reagan to back the federal legislation they supported. In 1984, the president, long a champion of states' rights, signed the Uniform Drinking Age Act, which would reduce highway funds to any state that did not raise the legal drinking age to 21.

With that, MADD wrote itself into the long and knotted history of alcohol on college campuses. Although the grass-roots organization set out to save lives on American roads, its legislative victory inevitably changed the dynamics of drinking on quads, in dorms, and at fraternities everywhere. Simply put, the drinking age compelled educators to become enforcers of the law.

Legions of lawbreakers adapted. In his authoritative 1987 book, *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America* (Harper & Row), Ernest L. Boyer wrote, "College officials have agreed with students that the change in minimum age has not stopped student drinking, only displaced it." Crackdowns, says one current president, have driven alcohol off campus and behind doors, creating "shadow organizations" of under-age drinkers.

MADD, which has helped pass hundreds of highway-safety laws, places much of its faith in enforcement. For a quarter-century, the group has hammered a zero-tolerance message on drunken driving and under-age drinking, which the organization considers inextricably linked.

The catch, of course, is that the two issues are not analogous. To drive drunk is to commit a dangerous act, one that has become taboo. To imbibe at age 18 is to engage in socially acceptable behavior, albeit prematurely under the law.

That distinction may explain why MADD has struggled so far to translate its message to academe, where drinking is a given and alcohol programs promote responsible drinking — not necessarily abstinence — among under-age students. Although MADD spawned the law that influences colleges each day, the group lacks a presence on most campuses.

MADD's leaders say they hope to change that by bringing more college leaders into community coalitions that support a range of drinking-prevention strategies. One thing the group is not eager to do, however, is debate the drinking age.

In August the organization publicly berated the Amethyst Initiative, a group of 100 presidents and chancellors who signed a statement urging legislators to revisit the law and to examine its effectiveness. The confrontation revealed the difference between two views of the same problem. MADD has long cast under-age drinking in black-and-white terms; many college officials see it as impossibly gray.

"We can't allow one organization to keep us from having this conversation," says James T. Harris III, president of Widener University, in Pennsylvania, who signed the statement.

Although the letter drew the ire of several legislators and national newspapers, the man behind the document has not retreated. In October, John M. McCardell Jr., a former president of Middlebury College, moved his fledgling nonprofit group, Choose Responsibility, from Vermont to Washington, D.C. There, he hopes to do just what MADD did: Start a movement that changes not only laws, but how Americans think about alcohol and young adults.

Tackling Public Perceptions

Candy Lightner founded MADD in 1980, after her 13-year-old daughter Cari was killed by a drunken driver. The organization, which set up its first office in Cari's bedroom, grew into one of the most respected advocacy groups in the nation.

As it expanded, however, Mothers Against Drunk Driving experienced growing pains. Ms. Lightner became concerned that it had turned into a campaign against alcohol, and she left the organization in 1985. "MADD," she later told *The Washington Times*, "has become far more neo-prohibitionist than I had ever wanted or envisioned."

MADD's leaders say they do not object to alcohol — except when it's on the lips of people under 21. In 1999 the group added the prevention of under-age drinking to its mission statement. The issue has been entwined with MADD's mission from the start, says James Bryant, the organization's national program manager.

In the early 1980s, the drinking age varied from state to state. An 18-year-old who could not buy a six-pack in New Jersey, for instance, could drive to New York to do so. That often led to intoxicated driving — and car accidents — along state lines, what MADD dubbed "blood borders."

Mr. Bryant sees a parallel between yesterday's perceptions of drunken driving and today's views on under-age drinking. "Back in the early 1980s, drunk driving was a joke, and we had to do a big, grass-roots initiative to change that public perception," Mr. Bryant says. "Fast-forward to under-age drinking. There's still an underlying sense that it's accepted."

In 2001, MADD sent colleges a sweeping set of recommendations for reducing excessive drinking. One idea was to create an Honor Roll of Colleges, a list of campuses that developed and enforced tough alcohol policies. MADD also announced the founding of its first campus chapter, at Boston University. The group told *The Chronicle* at the time that it would devote "significant financial resources" to its campus campaign.

But MADD's first major foray into higher education proved challenging. A shortage of time, money, and personnel limited the group's ability to start and maintain campus chapters, Mr. Bryant says. Starting in 2004, grants from the CarMax Foundation helped the organization start new student-run groups called UMADD, which at one point had chapters at two dozen campuses. But their message has not always caught on.

"A group that says under-age drinking is unacceptable," Mr. Bryant says, "tends to have a hard time getting support from students, even some faculty and administrators, where there's a 'drink responsibly' message."

At the same time, some of MADD's positions seem out of step with campus life. For instance, the group opposes "safe ride" programs, which provide late-night transportation to students who have been drinking. Although such services were created to prevent drunken driving, MADD believes they encourage under-age drinking. "It's a very inappropriate message to send," Mr. Bryant says.

Recently, as money for UMADD has dried up and several chapters have closed, MADD has modified its campus-outreach strategy. Mr. Bryant and other MADD leaders believe their organization can better serve colleges by engaging administrators and by inviting them to join communitywide partnerships.

Mr. Bryant points to John C. Hitt, president of the University of Central Florida, who led a task force on under-age drinking that included students, police officers, educators, doctors, and business owners. The group recommended enhancing alcohol education, creating databases to track alcohol incidents, and enacting a new ordinance that would allow Orange County, Fla., to restrict the hours of businesses that repeatedly sell alcohol to minors.

One cannot separate prevention of underage drinking from the prevention of drunken driving, says Kelli Davis. Ms. Davis, a recent graduate of Central Florida, reached that conclusion after a drunk driver killed her mother in 2003. She later learned that the driver had started to drink at an early age.

Ms. Davis now coordinates MADD's youth-outreach programs in central Florida and works with her alma mater's UMADD chapter. The job takes her to high-school classrooms, where she talks to students about the risks of alcohol, as well as to the parking lot of UCF's football stadium, where she has helped police officers spot under-age drinkers at tailgate parties.

"It's not about me being a prohibitionist," she says. "It's about enforcing the law."

Seeds of a Fight

For better or worse, that law has planted college students in a middle ground between childhood and independence. Once the charges of administrators, students long ago became adults who "vigorously claim the right to define and regulate their own lives," as a federal appellate court wrote in *Bradshaw v. Rawlings*, an influential 1979 college-alcohol case.

That 18-year-olds are minors when they walk into bars, but adults when they walk into voting booths, has long troubled Mr. McCardell, founder of Choose Responsibility. The drinking age, he says, has infantilized young adults — and has not deterred many of them from drinking.

In the spring of 2007, Mr. McCardell took that opinion to MADD's headquarters, in Irving, Tex. There he met with Charles A. Hurley, the group's no-nonsense chief executive officer. Mr. Hurley showed McCardell around the office, where thousands of photographs of drunk-driving victims line the hallways. The two had what both describe as a respectful, but lively discussion.

By the end of the meeting, things were clear: MADD and Choose Responsibility agreed that drinking was a problem on college campuses, but they would not work together. Mr. Hurley later affirmed as much when he declined Choose Responsibility's offer of \$100,000 to support MADD's advocacy of devices that disable cars when a driver's alcohol level is too high.

Mr. Hurley describes Mr. McCardell as well-meaning but misguided. "He's running around, setting brush fires on college campuses," Mr. Hurley says. Nonetheless, Mothers Against Drunk Driving took the former president seriously enough to create Support 21, a group of companies and associations that would criticize him a year later.

When Mr. McCardell's letter began to circulate this past summer, MADD's leaders considered two public-relations strategies, according to Don Murray, who directs the group's operations in Florida. Mr. Murray, for one, suggested ignoring the letter, so as to deny Mr. McCardell a big stage. Ultimately, a different plan prevailed. Although the letter called for an "informed and dispassionate public debate" of the drinking age, MADD's answer sounded as dispassionate as a battle cry.

The response revealed MADD's political instincts: It vilified not just the message but the messengers. After Mr. McCardell's letter became public, in August, Laura Dean-Mooney, MADD's president, described the document as if it were radioactive. In a public statement, she said the presidents who signed the letter had waved the "white flag" on under-age drinking.

At MADD's urging, its vast network of supporters barraged the presidents' in-boxes with angry form letters (one president said he received nearly 2,000 of the messages in two days). The group also rounded up condemnations from dignitaries, including Donna E. Shalala, president of the University of Miami and a former U.S. secretary of health and human services, who said that merely signing the statement "ultimately endangers young lives even more."

The implication was that to even question the drinking age was irresponsible, an idea that still dismays some of the letter's supporters. After all, academe is a place where instructors say there are no stupid questions, and where scholars and students alike delight in prodding sacred cows.

William G. Durden, who signed the letter, describes MADD's response as troubling. "Debate is part of democracy," says the president of Dickinson College, in Carlisle, Pa. "We should not accept things as immutable or say that 21 is a magic age, and if you challenge it, you will be cursed."

Mr. Hurley believes MADD had no choice but to denounce the letter. One reason, he says, was that supporters of the Amethyst Initiative have questioned the research that MADD holds dear. For instance, MADD says the drinking age has saved 1,000 lives per year, a statistic that comes from estimates by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, one of the group's longtime supporters.

"There's no reason to repeat a failed social experiment," Mr. Hurley says. "We see it as our job to defend the drinking age."

Mr. McCardell can cite other statistics, including studies by the Harvard School of Public Health, that conclude that while fewer college students drink today than a decade ago, those who do are drinking excessively, with sometimes fatal consequences.

"MADD's data is good," Mr. McCardell says. "But it does not show that the law has been an unmitigated success, on or off the highway."

Underdogs in Washington

Since August, prominent legislators have assured MADD that Congress will preserve the drinking age, which has strong public support. "We do not believe the law is in jeopardy," Mr. Hurley says.

That has not stopped MADD from using the drinking-age debate as a fund-raising tool, however. Recently, the group mailed a letter telling its members that the drinking age is "in grave danger." It warns about "well-organized college kids who are circulating petitions to change the law."

The dire message might have been an attempt to rally the base. Or perhaps it was a nod to Choose Responsibility, which just opened its new office on Capitol Hill. Next year, federal highway legislation is up for reauthorization, and the group hopes to persuade Congress to grant temporary exemptions to the Uniform Drinking Age Act. Those exemptions would allow some states to lower the drinking age to 18.

According to Choose Responsibility's proposal for a "waiver" to the law, participating states would have to present a plan for "educating and licensing" young adults to drink, then submit data on the effects of the change to Congress.

Recently, Mr. McCardell hired a full-time fund raiser and an executive director. "We want to be a major player," he says.

To do so, Choose Responsibility must compete with MADD, which has an annual budget of over \$50-million and plenty of lobbying muscle. Mr. McCardell's group, financed by foundations and

private donations, has only five employees, an annual budget of about \$500,000, and few, if any, off-campus allies.

But money might not be MADD's biggest advantage, says David J. Hanson, professor emeritus of sociology at the State University of New York at Potsdam. Mr. Hanson has written extensively about alcohol policies, and has often lambasted the group that championed the drinking age.

Over the years, he has learned something: "Criticizing MADD," he says, "puts you in the category of criticizing motherhood and apple pie."

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Section: Students

Volume 55, Issue 11, Page A1