

REAL COPS

REAL PAIN

My first experience with driving under the influence occurred when I was 13 years old. My older sister's best friend, who was at our home most of the time, was killed by a driver under the influence. She was only 17 years old. The driver was her boyfriend. They were drinking at a party and he thought he was okay to drive home. At the funeral, right before they closed the casket, the boyfriend ran up and started hugging her. He was screaming and tried to lift her out. Needless to say, it left an impression in my mind forever.

As a California Highway Patrolman (CHP), I have seen more than my share of horrible traffic accidents. As I respond to major accident calls, I never know what I will see. An accident is bad enough, but when someone loses his or her life to a drunk driver, it is a preventable, senseless tragedy.

Once as a Commander of the CHP office in Lancaster, California, I made nine death notifications in a six month period. In one case, an 18 year old boy was driving home on the freeway when another teenager, who was under the influence, entered the wrong way on the freeway and hit the 18 year old head on. Both vehicles burst into flames and neither escaped. The only thing worse than seeing the charred bodies, was having to tell his parents. Even though I made numerous other notifications, each one felt worse than the one before. How do you tell a mother, father and two younger boys that their son and brother was killed by a drunk driver? None of us will ever forget that day.

As Commander of the Visalia CHP Office, we responded to a call of a vehicle which was ripped in

***How do
you tell
a mother?***



By Brian Smith

Editor's Note: Brian Smith is a Captain with the California Highway Patrol. He joined the CHP in 1984. He is currently the Commander of the Visalia, California Office. Captain Smith and his staff courageously patrol the heart of the San Joaquin Valley in their effort to keep our community safe on the roads.

half at the driver's seat. The parents were returning home with their 2 and 4 year olds from a party at a children's style pizza restaurant. The father was drinking at the party and ran a stop sign. Their car was struck by another vehicle. The father was killed instantly. The 4 year old was killed and the 2 year old boy was placed on a back board. As the CHP helicopter pilots carried him past me, he looked right into my eyes. I could see he was in terrible pain. I just stopped and stared back. He died shortly after that and I still see that boy's face today.

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There are thousands of common, everyday, family men and women who are serving time in jail because they thought they were "okay" to drive. They figured they would drive carefully and make it home. However, they didn't make it safely. They were involved in a collision where someone was killed or injured. I can't even count how many times I have stopped a DUI driver and learned they had a sober driver in the car. The driver still went to jail and the sober driver went home.

We spend billions of dollars in this country on DUI education and enforcement and yet, people will still drink and get behind the wheel of a car. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), 40% of all traffic fatalities are caused by driving under the influence. IN 2003, 17,013 people were killed in the United States in an alcohol related accident. That computes to an average of one person killed every half hour by a DUI driver. As I finish writing this article, I wonder, who will be next to lose a loved one due to driving under the influence.