

Pulling together for a preventable problem

Kern County's businesses, groups come together following tragic deaths to raise awareness of community's DUI problem

By Jorge Barrientos

Pavinder Claire, Jackie Kvasnicka and Jessica Magee went from co-workers to friends while working at Kern Schools Federal Credit Union.

On Magee's birthday, Kvasnicka surprised her friend with a decorated workstation, Magee said. On other days, Claire and Magee enjoyed shopping and joking together at Valley Plaza.

"We were all really close friends," Magee said.

So when Kvasnicka received Bakers-

field Blaze playoff tickets, naturally Claire and Magee joined. After watching the postgame fireworks show that Aug. 30, 2014, night, the three drove home together in Kvasnicka's car.

Everything changed that night at the intersection of Rosedale Highway and Verdugo Lane, when a drunken driver slammed into the back of their car. Claire, 22, and Kvasnicka, 27, died in the crash. Magee, 21 at the time, survived after she was rescued from the car by California Highway Patrol officers and good Samaritans, but suffered serious burns throughout her body.

In an instant, countless lives were forever changed with one tragic, 100 percent preventable crime. But it brought Kern County together – including our local business community – in hopes of preventing such tragedies from ever happening again.

'Overwhelming' support

Word began to spread the next day about what happened, and co-workers began to show up at the hospital where Magee was placed.

"It was overwhelming at the time, but nice to have the support," Magee



Several hundred turned out for the 2014 Mothers Against Drunk Driving fundraising event.

PHOTO BY CASEY CHRISTIE

said. “Everyone was trying to see how they could help.”

In the days that followed, Kern Schools Vice President Michael George kept in touch with Magee’s family to see how the business could help – bringing meals, for example. At the credit union branches, co-workers were devastated.

“Drunk driving is something everyone is aware of, but you don’t realize the impact it has until it affects you personally,” George said. “And for us, it happened to three very loved team members.”

But the deaths also impacted others throughout town, including at Wells Fargo and FedEx where Kvasnicka’s and Claire’s families worked.

Coming together

The crash happened just a few weeks before the inaugural “Walk Like MADD & MADD Dash 5K” hosted by Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Kern County. The annual event aims to raise awareness of the dangers of drinking and driving and raises funds to help innocent victims and families of DUI crashes – like Claire, Kvasnicka and Magee.

More than 100 employees from Kern Schools signed up to walk or run in the event, shifting schedules on Saturday to make sure as many people could attend.

“We wanted to do everything we could to bring awareness to this problem and to show our support,” George said. “To say, collectively, we don’t want these tragedies to happen again.”

Family and friends of Claire and Kvasnicka also attended, many of them wearing matching team shirts. Determined, Magee also showed up in a wheelchair, covered head to toe to protect her sensitive skin.

“It’s really touching to see everyone that was there come together for a good cause,” Magee said, “and to give back to our community.”

Group effort

Thanks to the support of local businesses, Walk Like MADD & MADD Dash 5K that year raised just under \$50,000, and in the last two years has raised more than \$100,000 to provide support



Members of the MADD Kern County’s Advisory Board and the planning committee for Walk Like MADD & MADD Dash 5K. Front from left: Elizabeth Cox, Lisa Sorenson, Andrea Pflugh, Carla Pearson. Back from left: Ron Sheldon, John Martinho, Jessica Magee, Michael George, John Kvasnicka, Jorge Barrientos, Brandon Stallings, Neil Gehlawat and Matt Clark.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MADD KERN COUNTY

to local victims and survivors of drunken driving crashes. Those funds help provide services to help victims through the court process, high school presentations to heighten awareness and victim impact panels, where convicted drunken drivers hear directly from victims to prevent multiple offenses.

Unfortunately, the funds are needed year after year.

In 2015, Kern County law enforcement made 4,223 DUI arrests – nearly 12 per day. DUI crashes resulted in 121 cases of injuries and 10 vehicular homicides, according to the Kern County District Attorney’s Office.

Joining as business sponsors this year are Kern Schools, FedEx, Wells Fargo and State Farm, as well as nonprofits like Clinica Sierra Vista, local legal groups and law enforcement agencies. Chevron, another sponsor, is involved because it cares about safety in our community and its employees, who log thousands of miles each year on Kern County roads, said Chevron spokesman Adam Alvidrez.

“We want everyone to get home safely,” Alvidrez said. “These crashes can all be prevented by planning ahead and making the right decision.”

Ending drunken driving

The presenting sponsor for third Walk Like MADD & MADD Dash 5K on Sept. 24 is Chain | Cohn | Stiles, which year after year helps innocent families involved in crashes maneuver through

the civil litigation process. The law firm also helps organize the event through a planning committee that has grown each year to include local enforcement leaders, the Kern County District Attorney’s office, volunteers, victims and sponsoring representatives.

“We’re all in this together,” said Matt Clark, attorney and partner at Chain | Cohn | Stiles who also sits on the event planning committee and the newly established MADD Kern County Advisory Board. “We’re all tired of seeing our neighbors, friends and family’s lives affected by such a preventable crime.”

The committee also includes Magee, who since the crash has graduated from Cal State Bakersfield and speaks out about her experience in hopes of ending drunken driving in Kern County once and for all.

“To see families, friends, business and other people in town come together to try to make a difference and give back to our community is amazing,” Magee said.

To join them, get involved, register, start or join a team, and help end drunken driving in Kern County, visit walklikemadd.org/bakersfield. ☐

— Jorge Barrientos is the chairman of the planning committee for Bakersfield’s Walk Like MADD & MADD Dash 5K, member of the MADD Kern County Advisory Board, and director of marketing and public relations for Chain | Cohn | Stiles.

3rd Bakersfield Walk Like MADD & MADD Dash 5K

When: Saturday, Sept. 24 (check-in starts at 6:30 a.m.; ceremony at 7:30 a.m.; walk/5K starts at 8 a.m.)

Where: The Park at River Walk, 11298 Stockdale Highway

What: Victim 5K walk, chip-timed 5K run with medals awarded, kids’ fun run, vendors, information booths, games, much more.

Register/Donate: www.walklikemadd.org/bakersfield

Sponsorships: 661-334-4948, jbarrientos@chainlaw.com