



PHOTO BY CARLA PEARSON

BY JORGE BARRIENTOS, DIRECTOR OF MARKETING AND PUBLIC RELATIONS AT CHAIN|COHN|STILES

Community comes together for annual event to end drunken driving in Kern County

A few months ago, 27-year-old Alex Rubio was sentenced to 15 years to life in prison. Two years earlier, he had gotten behind the wheel while drunk and crashed at 118 mph at a southwest Bakersfield intersection into a car driven by 22-year-old Princess Almonidova, killing her instantly.

They are two young lives lost – and countless family members and friends impacted by these losses – because of a decision to drink and drive.

“These tragic crashes never have to happen, and that’s the most devastating part,” said Carla Pearson, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Kern County, victim service specialist. “But as a community, we can come together to help make sure these types of incidents never happen again here.”

Here’s how:

For the third year, MADD Kern County is hosting Bakersfield’s “Walk Like MADD & MADD Dash 5K” the morning of Saturday, Sept. 24, at The Park at River Walk – an event aimed to raise awareness of the DUI problem in our local communities, raise funds to stop drunken driving locally, and

provide support to local victims and survivors of drunken driving crashes.

ONE IS TOO MANY

In short, the goal of the annual event is to end drunken driving on our roadways. Unfortunately, Kern County keeps seeing statistics that show drinking and driving continues to be a problem.

Last year, Kern County law enforcement made 4,223 DUI arrests – nearly 12 per day. Even worse, DUI drivers caused crashes that resulted in 121 cases of injuries, 46 cases of great bodily injury and 10 vehicular homicides while impaired, according to the Kern County District Attorney’s Office.

And 2016 has already seen its fair share of tragedy on Kern County roadways at the hands of drunken drivers, including a 19-year-old Bakersfield College student killed in March when the car he was a passenger in was struck by a DUI driver.

Just one crash, injury or death due to DUI is one too many, said Brandon Stallings, Kern County deputy district attorney and chairman of the MADD Kern County Advisory Board.

“This is a 100 percent preventable crime,” Stallings said. “Prevention starts with planning safe transportation before the evening begins and the senses are impaired.”

‘SPIRIT OF FIGHT’

The first local “Walk like MADD” and “MADD Dash” came just a few weeks after a drunken driver rear-ended a car with three Kern Schools Federal Credit Union employees. Pavinder Claire and Jaclyn Kvasnicka died in the crash, and Jessica Magee suffered serious burns over most of her body.

Hundreds of friends, family and colleagues of the three showed up to support and speak out against the preventable crime. Jessica, too, took part in the walk, pushed in a wheelchair by loved ones, covered from head to toe to protect her skin.

For innocent victims of DUI crashes and their families, the MADD event – for at least one day – provides a venue to share stories, let them know they’re not alone, have their voices heard, remember lives lost, heal and hope together.

“Even for that one day we are heard,” said Alicia Smith, who two years ago was hit by a drunken driver and is still recov-

ering from a broken hip and knee and emotional scars. “To see the community come together for this cause is wonderful in so many ways.”

The first year, Alicia took part while in a wheelchair; the second year, she walked, although through pain; and this year, she’ll keep on marching, she said.

“Every year, this event is bigger and accomplishes more and more, and that spirit of fight motivates me to press on,” Smith said.

TOGETHER FOR MADD

The last two MADD events have raised nearly \$100,000, with all of the funds staying in Kern County, used for such things as:

- Victim services, helping them throughout their healing journey, inside of the courtroom and outside.
- Power of Youth high school presentations to heighten awareness about safe driving practices, which has reached thousands of students locally.
- Victim Impact Panels, where

convicted drunken drivers hear directly from victims. This provides healing for victims and reminds offenders how the choice to drink and drive needlessly hurts people and our entire community, therefore, preventing multiple offenses.

The goal this year is to raise \$55,000, with just more than \$20,000 raised so far through sponsorships, victims, and walk and run participants. Sponsors so far this year include Chain Cohn Stiles, Wells Fargo, State Farm, Chevron and various local media sponsors including KGET-17, KBAK-29, KBFX-58 and Bakersfield Life Magazine.

Two trophies are up for grabs, including the Kern County Corporate Challenge trophy going to the local business that raises the most money for MADD Kern County, and also the Kern County Law Enforcement trophy, which currently sits in the Kern County District Attorney’s Office, which raised thousands in 2015. ☐

Walk Like MADD & MADD Dash 5K

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

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

Where: The Park at River Walk, 11298 Stockdale Highway

Register/Donate: www.walklike-madd.org/bakersfield

Sponsorships: 661-334-4948, jbarrientos@chain-law.com

