

Drunken Driving: Stories of victim, perpetrator should be sobering

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Two names tell you something about the scourge of drunken driving: Ashley Easterbrook and Richard Gnida. She was killed by a drunken driver. He is one.

Ashley's image will be visible this fall as part of a nationwide campaign to remind young people that "friends don't let friends drive drunk." Richard may see it on television from jail, where he will be spending a year because he doesn't seem to get the message that drunken driving is a dangerous criminal activity.

Yes, this is the same Richard Gnida who was driving the Red Wings limousine that crashed after the 1997 Stanley Cup playoffs, permanently injuring a player and the team masseur.

The story of Richard's sentencing came a day after the story of Ashley's memorial in last week's Free Press. One evokes as much anger as the other does sadness.

Ashley, of Troy, was just 18 when she was killed with two friends by a drunken driver in 1997. Entries in her diary, reflecting a deep fear of drunken drivers and a premonition of early death, will be read to accompany video images from her life in the ad campaign. Ashley's family has been active since her death in the fight against drunken driving, courageously determined to salvage something positive out of a senseless, brutal tragedy.

Richard, 30, got the maximum allowable jail time for drunken driving -- third offense. A probation officer recommended locking him away after testifying that Richard has blown his rehabilitation opportunities and "appears to be in denial" about having an alcohol problem. As usual with these chronic offenders, it has sure been obvious to the rest of the world.

Jail may not do Richard any good, but at least it makes the roads a little safer for a while. He'll also lose his driver's license for five years, which isn't long enough, considering that he was driving on a suspended license in the limo crash.

We have too many Ashleys and Richards in our society every year. We won't stop one until we figure out how to stop the other more effectively.