

LONG ISLAND OPINION

'Drinking And Driving Can Mix'

By PHILIP B. LINKER

LAST Saturday night I drove home drunk — or almost certainly that would have been the indication from any breath or blood test that I might have been required to take. I drove home drunk the Saturday before that, too, and the one before that, and the one before that, in what probably amounts to a fairly consistent pattern over the last 25 years, ever since I have been licensed to drive.

During those 25 years, I have never had an accident, nor have I ever been issued a summons for driving while intoxicated or impaired. This is not to suggest that I encourage weekend intemperance, or intemperance at any time, for that matter. Neither do I wish to extol my own driving ability, nor to say that somehow I've been leading a charmed life, because what happens to be true for me applies no less to nearly all of my friends.

Indeed, I would venture to extend that to include the vast majority of those whose life styles are in general similar to mine; namely, to all who regularly socialize with family, friends and neighbors, at cocktail or dinner parties, in private homes, restaurants, clubs or any other place where alcoholic beverages are customarily served. At the end of any particular evening, most of those who have engaged in such activities undoubtedly have in their bloodstreams a measure of alcohol above the minimum percentage established by the state beyond which one may be considered intoxicated or impaired, or, to put it bluntly, drunk. Yet these people almost invariably drive home safely without incident, accident or arrest — just as I do.

It is a well-established fact that most alcohol-related traffic accidents involve young people, usually males, in the 18- to 24-year-old age group. To counter that, New York recently raised the minimum drinking age from 18 to 19, and, in order to be consistent with neighboring states and a growing national trend, is contemplating raising it to 21.

New York has also recently instituted much stiffer penalties for those found guilty of drunk driving, and organizations such as MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) and SADD (Students Against Drunk Driving) are becoming as ubiquitous as the corner tavern. These measures are definitely working. The number of accidents caused by drunken driving has been markedly reduced.

Nevertheless, and despite the fact that these new laws and stricter penalties, coupled with other measures such as stopping motorists at random and administering breath tests, are undoubtedly effective, I am convinced, based upon my own safe driving record and that of millions of others like me, that there is an equally effective method of reducing alcohol-related car accidents without resorting to such draconian meas-

ures, which severely encroach upon the rights and liberty of the vast majority of New Yorkers of all ages who are responsible drivers and who find their life styles threatened by such laws, regulations and practices.

When I was a child, I was always permitted a small glass of wine or champagne at Thanksgiving, Christmas, birthdays or other special occasions. If ever I asked for a sip of my mother's or father's drink at cocktail time, it was never denied. By the time I was 12 or 13, I was permitted, if I so desired, to add a couple of drops of rum to my Coke, or to drink a small glass of beer every once in a while. The same practice held true for most of the kids I grew up with.

To be sure, there were times in our early teens at a party when we all had too much to drink, but we weren't old enough to drive then anyway, and our parents, who had probably been at parties of their own, would drive us home — safely. But because our parents had never taught us that alcohol was bad, sinful, immoral, indecent or taboo, by the time we were 18 and licensed to drive on our own, none of us went out to bars, got drunk and killed ourselves driving home.

By then, drinking alcohol was simply no big deal. We had learned that alcoholic beverages were nothing more than another of life's pleasures to be enjoyed sensibly and responsibly; equally important, we had by then learned how to drink moderately and how to behave after a few drinks.

In many European countries, there is essentially no minimum drinking age, and on many highways, no speed limits. Yet in these same countries, the number of alcohol-related accidents is far lower than here in the United States. To be sure, there are drunken drivers in Europe, and those who are caught are dealt with severely, but for the most part, to Europeans alcohol and its responsible use is as much a part of civilized life as good manners and proper dress.

True liberty entails the responsibility, in effect, to police ourselves, and only when we fail in that obligation is it the province of the state to intervene. I believe that we Americans should import from Europe, along with its beers, wines and champagnes, another aspect of its civilization, namely, a sensible and mature approach to the use of these products.

Let us eliminate once and for all the mystique and the myths about alcohol along with the attitudes that led to such follies as Prohibition and the W.C.T.U.. Rather than raising, perhaps we ought to eliminate altogether the minimum drinking age, thereby removing from alcohol the tantalizing mystery that often accompanies things that are forbidden.

At the same time, let us as parents educate our children in the mature and responsible use of alcoholic beverages rather than forbidding them, which only leads to their childish and irresponsible misuse. Let us as citizens and motorists demand the enforcement of strict penalties for those found guilty of abusing that responsibility while driving, and by so doing, let us return a lost liberty to responsible users of alcohol and restore safety to our highways. ■

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