

Tess Rowland, President of MADD, on How an Alleged Drunk Driver Changed Her Life

By [Tess Rowland](#) April 24, 2023

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In this op-ed, the 24-year-old president of MADD talks about changing the conversation on drunk driving.

May 4, 2021, was supposed to be a normal Tuesday. Instead, I call it my "Alive Day."

It is both a heartbreaking day of anguish and pain, while also a miracle to be able to celebrate. It's the day my life was forever changed through no fault of my own, but due to someone else's choice to drive while allegedly under the influence.

Every day in the United States, [37 people](#) are killed due to an alcohol-related crash. That is one person every 39 minutes. And on May 4, 2021, that easily could have been me.

I was told by first responders on the scene of my crash that I was extremely lucky to not have been decapitated. My car took most of the blunt force trauma, but I still required 7 surgeries, 4 plates, and 22 screws to recover.

I still see those headlights every time I close my eyes, and my now severely altered body image and chronic pain are nothing short of

depressing.

And the worst part? This crash never even had to happen.

That's what motivated me to make the choice from my hospital bed not to be bitter about what happened to me. Instead, I decided to work to stop this entirely preventable crime from impacting others and stealing more lives.

And now, as national president of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), that's exactly what I am doing. I'm one of a handful of MADD presidents since the 1980 who is not a mom, and I want everyone to know that this organization is welcome to organizers of all ages and parenthood status.

I believe the first thing we need to do is to change the conversation around drinking and driving, starting with my generation. I believe we can use our collective power to eliminate impaired driving for good. It stops with Gen Z.

Truthfully, before my crash, I thought drunk driving was a thing of the past — a fading memory from the world before ride-sharing apps like Uber and Lyft.

Services like this have helped, especially in urban areas, but they haven't completely solved the problem. In fact, these preventable deaths are [on the rise](#) since the start of the pandemic. People who continued to drive during the pandemic may have engaged in riskier behavior including speeding, failure to wear seat belts, and driving under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, according to research by the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#) (NHTSA).

It saddens me even more to learn that an estimated [18% of drivers under the age of 21](#) have admitted to driving under the influence of alcohol. Further, data from NHTSA found that 27% percent of all fatal DUI-related crashes involve drivers between the ages of 21 and 24.

As a now 24-year-old, I hear excuses all the time:

"An Uber is expensive."

"I only had a few drinks. I can make it home."

"If I leave my car overnight, it'll get towed, and that's a hefty fine."

My response is simple, "The average expense of getting a DUI starts at \$20,000, [including attorney fees, court fines, etcetera](#). That's if you don't hurt or kill anyone or yourself. Drunk driving is a choice. The solution is not a miracle drug or cure. Instead, the power to solve the problem is within everyone. We have to change the conversation for good and be clear that, in any situation, drunk and impaired driving is unacceptable.

If you are going out and will be drinking alcohol, make a plan. This process should start before the first sip. Just think of it as a step in your routine, like part of a "Get Ready With Me" video on TikTok. When planning a night out and deciding what to wear, it is even more important to make sure there is a plan in place for everyone to get home safely.

These shifts in the ways we think and talk about alcohol may seem small but could have deep impacts on communities and families alike. By choosing a sober, designated driver, calling a ride-sharing service, or using public transportation you're making a powerful choice that *will* save lives. And while I am hopeful that one day we can

eliminate this crime altogether, what I've come to realize is that it's not enough to just talk about drunk driving. We must take action.

That is why I created [Coalition 45](#), a new alliance by Gen Z for Gen Z. Coalition 45 is made up of 45 youth leaders from around the country to educate, prevent, and save lives from drunk and impaired driving crashes in their communities.

Gen Z didn't start this problem, but we have the power and influence to disrupt the status quo. We can be the generation that makes "bragging" about drunk driving or debating about getting behind the wheel while impaired a thing of the past.

By bringing Coalition 45 together, we will build upon existing MADD resources while creating messaging and social media content that speaks to and influences our generation.

Together, we will change the conversations and culture surrounding drunk and drugged driving. It will take all of us to protect each other, our families, and our communities.

I know I am lucky; I have my "Alive Day." Tragically, far too many drunk driving victims and their families do not.

MADD provides supportive services to survivors of drunk and drugged driving at no charge through local victim advocates and the 24-Hour Victim Help Line. If you or someone you know needs help, MADD is here for you at [1-877-MADD-HELP](tel:1-877-MADD-HELP).

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