

m.a.d.d. Moms

After losing her son in a tragic car crash in 2006, Katy mom Carol Levin is on a mission to end drunk driving

Written by Gail G. Collins | Select photography by Sara Isola

“It’s as bad as you think it is,” Carol Levin says, describing the loss of her son to a drunk driver. “He was an amazing person, and we’ll live his life in the best way we can. We need that.” It’s why Levin got involved with Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD).

Todd Levin was 28 years old and was planning on proposing to his girlfriend Ralynn Healey soon. The couple was returning from a sports activity and dinner out. Todd never drove under the influence, and Healey was training for the Olympics as a figure skater and didn’t drink at all. On September 25, 2006 at 10 p.m., a drunk driver shot through a red light going 85 mph in a 35 mph zone. The impact was severe. Suffering two skull fractures and a crushed chest, Todd was killed instantly. Healey died on the way to Ben Taub Hospital. The driver was nearly twice the legal limit and didn’t stop to render aid.

“It was a horrific accident, and he didn’t even know he’d killed two people,” Levin says, still in disbelief. After five years in prison, the man shows no remorse. Advised by MADD, Levin undertakes a regular letter-writing campaign, asking authorities to deny his parole. She has been successful twice.

Finding Hope and Advocacy

The Levin family has lived in Katy for 25 years. Todd graduated from Katy High School with honors, and nearly every teacher attended his funeral almost 10 years ago. Since then, Levin has devoted a major portion of her life to helping others in the same circumstances.

Initially, those who have tragically lost a loved one may be so shocked they don’t remember their own names. “Sometimes,

you just hold and love them,” she says. “We’re all in the same family - the worst kind - and it helps to have been there, too.” According to Levin, the pain never goes away. It merely becomes a dull ache. Fortunately, therapy can help those who suffer such loss to cope with their pain. Victims find support through MADD advocates and activities.

The organization was founded by a mother whose daughter was killed by a drunk driver. This year, the nation’s largest non-profit is celebrating its 35th anniversary under the banner, “No more victims.”

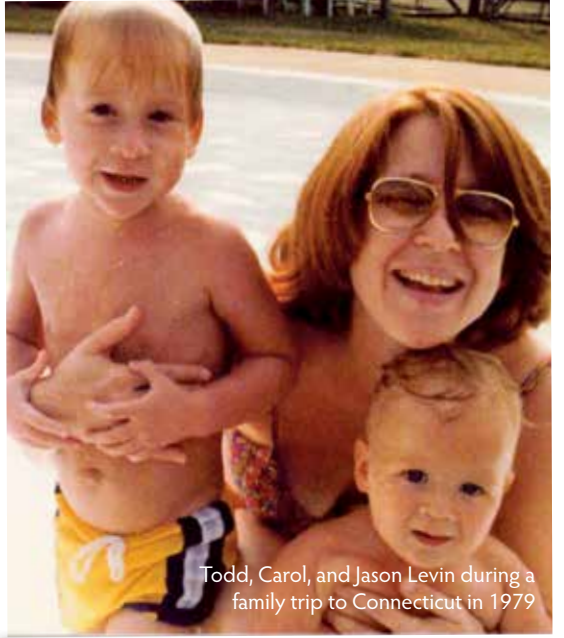
Drunk Driving Fatalities

MADD Southeast Texas Affiliate executive director John McNamee says, “MADD supports drunk and drugged driving victims and survivors at no charge, serving one person every 10 minutes through local MADD victim advocates and at 1-877-MADD-HELP.”

Unfortunately, the state and local community is known by a surprising statistic. “Texas, and specifically Harris County, leads the nation in drunk driving fatalities,” says McNamee. “In 2014 MADD Southeast Texas, which includes the Katy area, served over 2,800 victims of drunk driving.”

The organization also reaches teens to help prevent underage drinking. One program advises how to start a conversation with youngsters and continue it through their young adult years. National Teen Influencer allows teens to share their commitment to not drink while underage. MADD is involved politically, too. They cite increased law enforcement and bill HB 2246, creating anti-ignition legislation, requiring a convicted drunk driver to blow soberly into a device in order to start their car.

Katy mom Carol Levin volunteers with the MADD Southeast Texas Affiliate on their monthly victim impact panel to encourage drivers to realize the lasting effects of substance-impaired driving



Todd, Carol, and Jason Levin during a family trip to Connecticut in 1979



Todd graduated from the University of Texas in 2001 with a degree in marketing research



The Levin family honors Todd's memory at Stride for Change event

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Sharing Their Stories

Levin works on this bill's behalf and sits on a monthly victim impact panel, whose venue shifts around the city. The panel consists of victims who tell their stories, a police officer, and those formerly convicted. Drunk drivers run the gamut in ages. Levin brings photographs to help them think seriously about their decisions. To the older drivers, she says, "I impress on them that they're role models, and if they're drinking and driving, their kids will be, too."

Kathy Barzilla, another Fort Bend advocate, sits on the panel and acts as an advisory board member. In 1993 while she was on her way to work, when a car traveling 80 mph broadsided her. "If it hadn't been for Life Flight, I wouldn't be here to tell my story," she says. "I'm grateful for each new day."

With her pelvis fractured in six places, Barzilla had to learn how to walk again. Like Levin, she admits that her life changed forever on the day of the accident. Barzilla was told she could never bear children as a result of the accident. She never met the drunk driver who hit her, but Barzilla says she has learned to forgive the driver and in return has been able to let go of the bitterness and anger.

Planning Ahead


"Death and injuries are 100% preventable. Just plan ahead," Barzilla says. The only night each year most people actively plan to avoid drunk driving is New Year's Eve, but any time any day, it should be a reality. The women advise others to always have a plan and a number they can call for help.

Every year the group participates in Walk Like MADD, an initiative that gives victims a chance to raise money and awareness while honoring their loved ones. "It takes years to fight your way back," says Levin, and MADD helps people do just that. **KM**



GAIL G. COLLINS writes internationally for magazines and has two books on expatriate life that create a charity revenue stream.

EDITOR'S NOTE: We would like to thank the members of MADD Southeast Texas Affiliate for taking a stand and making a difference in the Katy community. Visit madd.org.




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