

Juggernaut

Empowered Youth Mark a Milestone

By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.

Theodore Roosevelt once said, “In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing.” Twenty-five years ago, 15 students in the Boston suburb of Wayland, Massachusetts, faced just such a moment of decision: two of their classmates had been killed in alcohol-related automobile crashes less than two weeks apart.

For them, doing nothing was not an option.

Their realization that “if the problem is ours, the solution is ours” proved to be a defining moment in the early days of an empowerment movement that would sweep across the country, involving millions of students and saving thousands of lives. Built upon a nascent peer-to-peer learning paradigm and harnessing the vast energy, enthusiasm, and commitment of youth, a new prevention juggernaut called SADD altered forever our society’s understanding of teens’ capacity to create positive change.

Those students, working in concert with their parents, teachers, and friends, helped to change a culture of drinking and driving that, in one year alone, claimed more than 6,000 young lives – a number since reduced by nearly 60 percent.

What began then as one small club in one small Massachusetts community, has today morphed into a national organization that still counts as its greatest assets the propensity and power of young people to care about each other and themselves.

As one Indiana teen put it, “I have chosen a SADD lifestyle because I believe that students can make a difference in their schools and communities.” In turn, an Illinois student said, “SADD stands for everything I believe in ... for not making stupid choices, for not just following the crowd.”

In keeping with most important anniversaries, the focus of SADD’s 25th (to be celebrated nationally the week of Monday, October 30) is on success. SADD chapters across the country will participate in an event called “Lighting the Way,” hosting activities that mark SADD’s record of achievement. But milestones have a way of obscuring critical work that remains to be done.

According to a new *Teens Today* driving study by SADD and Liberty Mutual Group, 19 percent of teens report driving under the influence of alcohol, 15 percent report driving under the influence of marijuana, and 7 percent report driving under the influence of “other drugs.”

Clearly, too many teens continue to place their lives, and the lives of their friends, at risk. And clearly, too many of them continue to die.

Thus, the revolution born steps from Lexington and Concord continues unabated.

Advocating the power of positive choices, SADD, as Students Against Destructive Decisions, now embraces an expanded mission both to beat back the scourge of impaired driving and to tackle other pressing problems of youth, including underage drinking, drug use, violence, bullying, and suicide – to name just a few.

The stakes are high and young lives hang in the balance. But, as time has proved, the hard work is worth the effort. According to *Teens Today*, 86 percent of teens and 95 percent of parents aware of SADD believe it plays a positive role in the choices that young people make.

In 2006, our teens have the same sense of conviction, the same opportunity to create positive change, and the same ability to influence the future as the 15 students at Wayland High School had back in 1981. With clarity of vision and staunchness of heart, those first SADD students simply refused to sit idly by while their friends and neighbors died around them. Instead, they seized upon the power that was unmistakably theirs to do *something*. That is their legacy.

Today's challenges are no less vexing and today's teens no less capable. How they respond will be *their* legacy; what they will be remembered for 25 years down the road.

Doing nothing was not an option in 1981 and it won't be an option now.

Happy anniversary, SADD.

Stephen Wallace, national chairman and chief executive officer of SADD, Inc. (Students Against Destructive Decisions), has broad experience as a school psychologist and adolescent counselor.

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