

# The Detroit News

## Jacques: Drunken drivers keep stealing lives

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As a teenager, whenever I'd be heading out the door and call out "see you later" to my parents, my dad would always have the same response.

"Lord willing."

After a drunken driver killed his youngest sister on Christmas morning in 1987, my family learned the painful lesson that you can't take anything for granted. My aunt Amy, who was 26, and her boyfriend had run back to her house to pick up forgotten presents.

They never returned.

I was just 8 when this happened, but it changed me. To this day, I feel an uneasiness when I know family members are on the road. When someone is late arriving, I imagine the worst.

And when drunken drivers rob other families of their loved ones, it brings it all back.

The heartbreaking story of the Abbas family of Northville shocked their community and the region. Issam and Rima Abbas and their three children were killed returning from a holiday trip to Florida. A driver heading the wrong way on Interstate 75 in Kentucky struck them head on. Authorities have said the driver, who also died, had a blood-alcohol content nearly four times the legal limit.

In response, U.S. Rep. Debbie Dingell, D-Dearborn, is working on legislation in memory of the family that would require new cars have ignition interlock devices to prevent them from starting if the driver is intoxicated.

When Rima Abbas' father heard of the Abbas Act, he said, "If only it could save one life."

That's a sentiment that resonates with me.

Despite all the different options people have now to get around, drunken driving deaths are still high.

The number has fallen by about a third in the past 30 years, following a push to enact tougher laws and enforce them. Too many people keep dying, however. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, around 30 people die each day in drunken-driving accidents — more than 10,000 a year. Roughly a third of all deaths from car crashes involve drunken driving.

In 2017, there were 937 fatal crashes in Michigan, and 320 of those involved alcohol. Drug- and alcohol-related accidents totaled nearly 45 percent of all fatal crashes.

First Lt. Mike Shaw, public information officer with the Michigan State Police, says while drunk driving is still a problem, police are concerned about a much broader swath of impaired driving.

“It’s not fair anymore just to talk about drunk driving,” Shaw says. With opioid and marijuana use on the rise, people are driving under the influence in greater numbers.

Shaw says there’s no reason for anyone to get behind the wheel impaired, with ride sharing, buses and other transportation readily available. But the fact people do means there’s a need for more education. And a call for more personal responsibility.

Because of the growing range of impaired drivers, Shaw doesn’t think ignition interlocks on all cars is a practical solution, and says it would be “quite a hurdle” and expense.

But he’s glad the conversation is taking place and raising awareness.

As someone who doesn’t want the government in my daily business, I also have reservations about the interlocks on every car. Why should all of us be treated like potential criminals?

Peter Van Doren, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and an expert in regulation, says given the huge economic cost of alcohol-related accidents, mandating the ignition breathalyzers could be cost-effective. Yet he also points to how unpopular other safety efforts by the government have been, including the short-lived seat-belt interlocks in the early '70s, which were quickly shot down amid public uproar.

Michigan already requires interlocks for first-time DUI offenders convicted with blood-alcohol levels of 0.17 or higher. A number of other states have stricter laws.

"If we could keep one person from dying on the roads, and make people think twice before getting behind the wheel when they shouldn't — even when they are buzzed and think they'll be OK — then won't we have been successful?" Dingell said earlier this month when she introduced the bill.

This may not be the right solution, but at least people are talking about it.

And if that saves a life, it's worth it.