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English 1B

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Drive Sober

A little over a year ago, I was involved in a car accident. I came to a stop at a red light, around 1 a.m. in the morning, with my best friend in the passenger seat. I looked both ways, then accelerated my vehicle. Before I knew it, a pair of headlights were coming at me fast on my car’s right side. I tried to speed up and get the car out of the way, but the oncoming vehicle still tagged my car and made us spin out,. The car was absolutely smashed from the right rear wheel and any part of the vehicle beyond that. My friend and I came out unscratched, frightened, and grateful to be alive. I ran a red *light*, not a stop sign. I was supposed to stay parked until it turned green, but I didn’t. I didn’t because my decision making was impaired. I had been drinking with my friend before I decided to get behind the wheel. I told myself “we’re not too far from home, I’m okay enough for a short drive.” Well, the accident happened a mile from home and my friend was only a foot short of death. It’s never okay to drive drunk. Due to my own experiences and mistakes, I feel that it’s necessary to advocate against drinking and driving. This issue is alive and well, and far too many people commit this crime. People still die because of it, futures are still ruined, and people still lose their loved ones. You might’ve heard before that drunk driving is bad, but the message just isn’t coming through for everyone, and we have to work together to get the issue resolved. We, as a community, must come together to successfully resolve the issue of drunk driving. The consequences are horrendous, but the solution only takes a collective effort.

Driving under the influence of alcohol is a serious, ongoing, rampant issue. By definition, driving under the influence, or a DUI, is constituted when a driver is operating a vehicle with a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.08% or higher. For reference, a BAC of 0.08% averages to about four alcoholic drinks. One alcoholic drink is considered 12 ounces of beer (5% alcohol content), 8 ounces of malt-liquor (7% alcohol content), 5 ounces of wine (12% alcohol content), or 1.5 “shots” of liquor (40% alcohol content, or “80-proof”), such as gin, rum, or vodka. This standard is to be taken with a grain of salt, however. BAC varies from person to person. A person of below average weight may have a BAC of 0.08% from less than four drinks, causing them to be too drunk to drive even though they consumed less drinks than the legal limit. For another example, some beers have a higher alcohol content than 5%, like IPAs or Stouts. Someone could say “I’ve only had three beers, I’m good to drive,” but considering the alcohol content, they might already be inebriated past their functional ability to operate a vehicle. It may seem like a confusing task to keep track of how to get away with drinking and driving legally, and that’s because it is. The best way to avoid any confusion about how much is too much is to avoid the combination of drinking and driving altogether. Driving is a serious responsibility which requires the utmost care and consideration. The consequences of irresponsible driving range from incredibly expensive to fatal. In my situation, the consequences were strictly financial, and while I’m grateful everyday that I got off easy, it did force me to take on a second job and put school on hold for a semester in order to buy a new car and pay outstanding damages to the other party involved in the accident. I can only imagine what people go through when they lose their loved ones due to the decisions of an irresponsible driver who chose to get behind the wheel.

Though I was lucky enough to get out of my accident alive, there are thousands of others who haven’t been so lucky. Accidents involving an alcohol-impaired driver account for about 30 deaths per day in the United States, which is about one person every 50 minutes, give or take, or about 11,000 deaths per year. Additionally, 17% of all the deaths of children between the ages 0-14 caused by traffic accidents also involved an alcohol-impaired driver. Not only is that a lot of people dead, but a lot more family members who suddenly had to deal with the loss of their loved ones. Sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters and more, all dead because of the horrible decisions that some people made. I had the chance to speak with a friend of mine, named Emma, who has felt the loss of a family member due to a drunk driving accident. About 3 years ago, Emma’s cousin was struck by a speeding driver who ran a red light when she was driving home from work. Emma was able to explain to me the extreme grief the situation put her family through. They had to deal with expensive funeral costs and extensive emotional trauma. The driver received six years in prison, but Emma explicitly stated how nothing could make up for her family’s tremendous loss. It’s largely important that we don’t forget about the negative impact drunk driving has on other people. Someone must not care very much about others if they would ever consider taking the risk of getting behind the wheel while intoxicated, but that doesn’t mean we, as a community, should stop trying to spread the message that those actions are unacceptable, regardless of whether or not we think those cries will be heard. Driving drunk should never occur under any circumstances.

Since I was old enough to go to parties, I started seeing people drive home after drinking. I knew that it was *technically* a bad thing, but everyone did it. Nothing bad ever happened, so I never saw an issue with it. I would do this, my friends would do this, their friends would do it and so on. It wasn’t until my own accident that I learned my lesson. It got me thinking seriously about my own life, all the things I could’ve missed out on if I had been injured or killed, but it also got me thinking about the consequences I dealt with besides bodily injury. The accident forced me to take an entire semester off school in order to cover my expenses. That was supposed to be the semester that I graduated from college, but I wasn’t able to because of my foolish mistakes. Half a year was wasted. Similarly, a friend of mine is dealing with the same issue. My friend Ivan recently told me a terrible story. Ivan has been wrongly accused of driving under the influence. After running something over on the freeway and having both his right side tires blown out, he and his friend awaited help on the side of the road. His friend was driving, and he was sober, but Ivan had a few drinks (hence the reason his friend drove home). A highway patrolman saw them on the side of the road and pulled over to the side of the road. Rather than make sure they were okay, he began to give them sobriety tests and he eventually charged Ivan with the DUI. He did so without administering a breathalyzer test, and he even searched the car without a warrant/permission. Ivan has since told me that he now faces the possibility of being kicked out of school, a permanent DUI conviction, and he had to pay over $6,000 in lawyer fees just to get proper representation. He’s going to school for social work and he wants to be a police officer, but a charge like this could ruin his chances at his dream career. Considering he only has a year left to graduate, this situation is putting him under tremendous stress and worry. The worst part of it all is, he didn’t do it. It’s important to remember not every drunk driver is some sleaze-bag old man coming from the local dive bar, like we might all picture. Sometimes it’s the college student who might have a bright future ahead of them, who might’ve had a bit much to drink. But drinking isn’t the problem here, it’s drinking and driving. Now Ivan didn’t commit this crime, yet he’s still facing the consequences. Imagine what one might face if they’re actually guilty of these actions. As an outsider listening to his story, I felt scared. When he told me about all the horrible things he’s facing, the only thing that seemed to be keeping him together was the fact that he has a chance of beating this wrongful charge. However, if you *actually* drive under the influence, and if you are caught, there’s no weaseling your way out of it. You’re definitely going to face the music. It’s imperative that this message reaches everyone, young men and women included. Even if you decide that you *are* a selfish person and that you don’t care who you might hurt on the road, think about the damage you could cause to yourself. If the only things that can keep the roads safe are selfish reason, well then at least the roads are still safe.

The simplest solution to resolve the issue of driving under the influence is to talk to your friends. I understand that this seems too simple, not harsh enough, or ineffective. However, we have strict punishments in place, yet the problem seems to continue on. Some of the laws in place to prevent DUI’s are the threat of losing your license, the 10 year stain on your record (first offense), and the threat of serving anywhere from 4 - 10 years in prison. There’s even devices called ignition interlocks. Ignition interlocks are breathalyzers that are installed in your vehicle and won't let the vehicle start if the driver blows a .08% BAC level or over. These interlocks are required for all convicted DWI *(Driving While Intoxicated)* offenders. The benefits of these are the obvious fact that you can’t start the car if you’re too drunk to drive, but also the shame that a driver would face any time they have to use the interlock and someone sees them/rides along in the car with them. With all these laws, regulations and punishments in effect, it’s a wonder that the epidemic doesn’t seem to be deterred. I believe it’s because the change has to be social. The change should start with talking to your friends. Be straightforward and tell them what they’re doing is wrong, shame them if you have to, but don’t let things go unchecked. I realize it's difficult to convince your peers to do the right thing when the right thing isn't considered “cool.” I think that's one of the problems: it's not “cool” to designate a driver, call an Uber or a Lyft, walk to the party instead of drive, or spend the night at a friend’s and drive home sober in the morning. It's difficult to check your friends, but it's a start on the journey to end drunk driving.

I think it's important to note that young men and women seem generally believe that drunk driving is a skill. They tend to think that if they made it home in one piece, that they're allowed to drive irresponsibly. “I drive better when I’m drunk” is one of the more toxic mentalities that’s harder to convince people to abandon. The harsh reality is that we all think that, until it goes completely wrong. I think that if it were possible to change people's minds about the idea of treating drunk driving like something to brag about, then drunk driving could decrease drastically. It might be a good idea try and chip away at the competitiveness behind social drinking, and encourage a more relaxed environment, in an effort to reduce the amount of alcohol consumption, effectively reducing the chances of driving drunk. To illustrate my point, I’m going to share a testimony from my friend, James. James told me about the time he crashed his brand new car after coming home from a party. He claimed to be blacked out, and to not have remembered leaving the party. All James remembered was waking up in a parking lot with the front end of his vehicle smashed in and a police officer asking him questions. It turns out James had run into a telephone pole before he ended up in the parking lot. As a result of his actions, he was convicted of a DUI, lost his license for 6 months, lost his brand new car, and was sentenced to weekly rehabilitation classes. To this day, James still hasn’t saved up enough for a new car and still has to attend those classes. He told me he’s grateful to have gotten off easy, and he’s glad he didn’t hurt anyone else. I think the only reason he felt okay to drive home was pride. He didn’t have a special car, it was a Kia. Though he doesn’t recall completely, he believes he didn’t tell anyone he was leaving, so there was no evidence of him trying to prove something to anyone by driving home. He probably wanted to prove to himself that he “drove better when he was drunk,” something that backfired completely. As a community, we should try and break down this false sense of pride that people take in driving drunk. This is included when I say “talk to your friends.” There’s no accomplishment in driving drunk but not enough people think that. It’s up to us to change our awkwardness over this specific topic, up to us to talk to our loved ones about their actions, and up to us to resolve this issue that has such a negative impact on so many lives.

The solution I have to end drunk driving is to start small: change yourself, then your friends and family, then they change their friends and family and so on. You know it’s wrong, and so does everyone you ask, but it continues to happen. I think part of the reason is because we let it: all of us. The numbers show us what the horrible results are, the testimonies and interviews let us know how negatively this affects us, but the response to this issue isn’t working. There are harsh laws and restrictive policies in place. Law enforcement is doing everything it can to try and keep our roads safe, but it’s ultimately up to the drivers. If you look at the way cigarette smoking trends have changed, you can see that the change has been social. People started to talk about them like they were disgusting to the point where a negative stigma was attached to them. I think we can do the same thing with driving under the influence because words are extremely powerful. All it takes is a collective effort. Talk to your friends, and when they try to brush it off jokingly, keep at a serious tone. At the end of the day, the negative effects of drunk driving far outweigh any awkwardness or shame that may come from talking to your friends about their actions.

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