

# Judge's View: Casual attitudes toward drinking and driving must be challenged

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My friend Richie was killed the summer I was 17 and about to start my senior year of high school. I remember the visitation: Richie's dad, a big farmer, quiet, even taciturn, weeping, silent and broken. I remember Richie's picture on the program, smiling in his T-shirt and jeans. Someone remarked he hadn't had his senior pictures taken yet.

Richie was killed by a drunk driver. As is generally the case, the drunk driver was his friend, actually his cousin. Richie had been drinking too, and when the van rolled he was thrown out, sustaining a massive head injury.

As a judge, I'm often asked which drug is the worst. What would I eliminate if I had the power? That's easy. It's alcohol. Alcohol has such a pervasive and stunning impact that if it were gone at least half of the courthouse would shut down. Our society is awash in alcohol. Gallup statistics show 67 percent of adult Americans drink. But it isn't necessarily the use of alcohol that's the problem. It's the overuse, the abuse.

On average, someone is killed in an alcohol-impaired driving crash every 45 minutes in the United States. The good news is that alcohol-impaired fatalities have decreased 44 percent since 1982. In 2009, alcohol-related traffic deaths in Minnesota dropped to 141. That's the lowest number since the state has been keeping statistics!

In an age in which everyone thinks crime is on the rise (in fact, crime rates have dropped for years but that's a different article) and all news is bad news, we should take a moment and be genuinely thankful for these decreases, which are largely due to awareness campaigns, the use of designated drivers, smarter and stricter laws, and stepped-up enforcement.

Nonetheless, we must ask ourselves hard questions about why many of our children so thirst for alcohol in a tragic bid to make their lives complete. We must make it a moral imperative to never get behind the wheel impaired.

We've made recycling such an issue that most people wouldn't dream of throwing a plastic bottle into the trash. Yet some people think nothing of regularly driving drunk. I'm all for recycling, but what is wrong with the picture when some are more concerned about the plastic bottle than the friend or stranger they could kill on the way home?

Every day I see the carnage brought by our love for alcohol. I see the young man with incredible promise permanently injured after being run down. I see the vibrant son, husband and father gone and his loved ones

locked in grief and anger. Each day I do all I can to battle against this cultural, emotional and spiritual enemy that harms so many and costs so much.

I see the other side, too, the drivers who have killed or maimed friends, family or strangers. They and their families experience great guilt, shame and destruction as a result of their choices and addictions.

It claims everyone, guilty or innocent.

Richie would be 45 now. There is a hole in our community where he should be. I could have been Richie, dead at 17. I could have been the driver who killed him. What could I do, given what I know nearly 30 years later, to stop the 17-year-old me from driving impaired?

What can I — what can we — do to stop those who do so now? Do we have the courage and resolve to change our culture, to demand through word and deed that this terrible attack on our community stop? Can we create a culture that doesn't look for answers in a bottle?

*Shaun R. Floerke is a district court judge chambered in Duluth and one of the founders of the South St. Louis County DWI Court dedicated to stopping repeat offenders. His comments are submitted on behalf of the Driving 4 Safe Communities Coalition.*