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CONTACT: Stew Salowitz

Drunken Driving Program Set for Illinois Wesleyan on March 4

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — In America last year, more than 16,650 people were killed by drunken drivers, accounting for 40 percent of all traffic deaths.

A brutally blunt program on the hazards and consequences of drunk driving is slated for IWU next month, including a presentation from an IWU junior who lost a sister in a drunk driving accident. "Tragedies of Drunken Driving" will take place on Tuesday, March 4 at 7:30 p.m. in the Hansen Student Center at IWU, 300 E. Beecher.

Kate Olmsted from Orland Park, Ill., an IWU junior majoring in English with an emphasis on secondary education, developed the program and is organizing the event for the third consecutive year. She has a personal stake in educating as many of her fellow students as possible on the subject. Her older sister, Erin Olmsted, was killed in March 1997 while she was a passenger in a car driven by a drunken driver. Kate was a high school freshman when Erin, a senior in high school, died.

The program, which is free and open to the public, also features speeches from Nancy Foy, the Orland Park, Ill., representative of the chapter of the Alliance Against Intoxicated Motorists (AAIM), who lost her husband in a drunk driving accident; and Mike Kenny, who was convicted of a fatal drunk driving offense in 1994. The program will wrap up with a question-and-answer period.

In planning the program, Olmsted has been assisted by Jenny Applegate, a senior majoring in business with a minor in psychology from Oak Forest, Ill., and Jackie Burnette, a senior nursing major from Orland Park. The three IWU students were friends and classmates at Carl Sandburg High School in Orland Park.

Kate Olmsted

Olmsted admits that it's still frustrating when one of her peers does not heed her advice about drinking and driving. That frustration has not stopped her from continuing to speak out on the subject at every opportunity.

"When I go out on a weekend and know that someone is going to drive a car when he or she shouldn't, it is frustrating," Olmsted admits. "Still, I can't let that stop me from continuing to do whatever I can do to let people know about the issues."

Olmsted believes that more can and should be done at the junior high school and senior high school levels to educate students. But she also believes that such education has to be realistic.

"One of the things that I hope to do when I begin my teaching career is design and develop educational programs that will reach students when they really need to hear and understand this message," says Olmsted.

"Although I agree completely that 16-year-olds should not be drinking, I also know that many, many kids who aren't of legal age do drink," she says. "I think it's increasingly important to make them aware of what it means to be responsible."

Olmsted, who works with the Alliance Against Intoxicated Motorists, is glad to hear that statistics show as much as a 60 percent decrease in the number of drunken-driving fatalities for 16- and 17-year-old drivers. She knows that there is more to be done.

"I was reluctant to begin speaking out because I had a really hard time talking about my sister's death," Olmsted says. "Even now I often get choked up in a presentation if it's been a while since I've made one. To talk about it a few times a year is good for me. It's like therapy. If I don't do something, it's like it happened for no reason."

To discuss issues of drunken driving with Olmsted, contact Jeff Hanna or Ann Aubry at 309/556-3181.