

IWU student Kate Olmsted's painful loss inspires a campus crusade against drinking and driving .

By Phyllis Coulter Rasmussen

Photo by Marc Featherly

Sometimes Kate Olmsted '04 is a runner, often covering more than six miles at a time. Sometimes the Illinois Wesleyan English major is a poet, a teacher in training, a writer of thoughts. Sometimes she's an activist, speaking to crowds of young people. Sometimes she can't sleep at night thinking about the past. Sometimes she's a giver or receiver of a supportive hug.

But always, she's someone who lost a dear sister in a car crash caused by a drunk driver.

Olmsted is far from alone in experiencing loss due to drunk driving.

That point was brought home this past March at a program organized by Olmsted entitled, "Drunk Driving: A Chain Reaction." Held on a wintry Tuesday night at Hansen Student Center, the event was attended by about 300 IWU students. At the start of the event, Jaclyn Burnette '03 — a nursing major who helped Olmsted organize similar campus programs for the past three years — asked audience members to rise if any relatives or loved ones had been injured or killed in a drunk driving accident. Soon more than half the audience was standing. Burnette asked anyone who had driven or been in a car with someone who had been drinking to join those standing, and almost everyone in the room was on their feet. The chain reaction was clear.

About three of every 10 Americans will be involved in an alcohol-related crash some time in their lives. Last year, more than 16,650 people were killed by drunk drivers, accounting for 40 percent of all traffic deaths in the U.S.

What those statistics don't tell are the stories of lives wasted or devastated by drinking and driving. Kate Olmsted's story began on March 2, 1997, at 4:30 a.m. Staying overnight at a friend's house, she was awakened and told that her father was coming to get her. "Dad arrived, broke into tears, and could hardly drive," she recalls. "Mom was as white as a ghost." They told her that her 17-year-old sister Erin had been killed when the car she was riding in crashed into a telephone pole. The car's driver, then a 23-year-old man, was charged, and later convicted, for driving under the influence.

Every day since has held moments of pain, as reminders of her sister trigger the memory of her loss. Those feelings overwhelmed Olmsted in the weeks and months following Erin's death, when she tried to resume her normal life as a freshman at Carl Sandburg High School in Orland Park, Ill., where Erin had been a senior. A week after the funeral, she returned to school, only to find the hallways and classrooms lined with ribbons and signs that students had put up in remembrance of Erin.

Olmsted does not know if she will ever fully recover from the loss she feels at the death of her sister, whom she also regarded as her best friend. But she is making progress.

“At first I only had bad days. Now I have good days all the time and even have some great days,” she says.

She will often drive two hours to Orland Park just to visit the cemetery where her sister is buried. She sometimes spends the entire afternoon seated beside the burial plot, talking to Erin, and remembering.

When she goes home for the holidays, Olmsted has trouble sleeping in the room she and Erin shared as teenagers when they would talk about everything as they drifted off to sleep. She will take her pillow into her parents’ or her younger brother’s room and fall asleep on the floor.

Part of the healing process for Olmsted has been reaching out to others to talk about her feelings of loss and share her experiences, and the memories of Erin that she cherishes. She gave her first speech in a packed gymnasium at Sandburg High several months after her sister’s death, facing down her fears of speaking before a crowd of 2,500 in the hopes that her words might prevent her listeners from experiencing a similar tragedy.

After that speech, Olmsted agreed to speak at court-organized victim-impact panels where convicted drunk drivers must listen to how the consequences of their actions affect victims. She remembers feeling frustrated “because every month it was the same offenders in the courtroom ... Sometimes they just don’t want to be there, and that is hard.” But it has also had its rewards when some of the drivers revealed to Olmsted that they had been moved by her words and vowed never to drink and drive again.

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Over the past four-and-a-half years, she has repeated her message against drunk driving at about 20 events. Olmsted says her favorite speaking venue is junior high and high schools, because she believes it is among those students she can have the greatest impact. Being closer in age to teenagers than others who speak on the subject helps her make a stronger connection to those listeners, she hopes. She was also a role model for the DARE program, which encourages elementary students to resist drugs and violence. Olmsted even appears in a film shown in driver’s education classes across the country, aimed at preventing drunk driving.

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration statistics suggest that this message must continue to be told, as motor vehicle crashes remain the number-one cause of death among youth ages 15 to 20.

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

For the last three years, Olmsted has also helped organize drunk-driving awareness events on campus, in conjunction with the group University Students Against Intoxicated Drivers (U-SAID). The passion and creativity that Olmsted and her co-organizers bring to these events have made them compelling, at times disturbing, and often unforgettable.

During the previous year's event, for example, two pre-chosen IWU students volunteered to demonstrate the effects of alcohol on coordination and judgment. Local police videotaped the sober pair — a man and a woman — successfully performing field sobriety tests such as walking a straight line and reciting the alphabet. Afterwards, over a 70-minute period, the students consumed six light beers each and then, in front of the assembled students, went through the same tests, failing all but one and registering a blood-alcohol content well above the legal driving limit.

The point of the experiment, Olmsted says, was not to promote zero-tolerance for drinking, but to show the need to drink responsibly and in moderation. She says many in the audience were stunned to see the effects of drinking an amount they might consume during a typical night of partying, especially on people they knew or could relate to as peers.

Also at last year's program, Olmsted invited three speakers: two parents who lost children to drunk drivers, and a convicted drunk driver whose accident resulted in a fatality.

Organizing these events can be physically and emotionally draining, but Olmsted finds support from friends who have helped her coordinate the campus programs. Burnette — who went to Sandburg High and knew Erin Olmsted as the captain of the school's gymnastics team — calls Kate Olmsted “one of the strongest people I know She is passionate about the people whom she loves, and that is why she tells her story. I have learned much from Kate about life and friendship, and I hold that knowledge dear to my heart.”

Also part of the trio organizing activities until her graduation last December was business major Jenny Applegate '03. While Olmsted misses Applegate's help, she was pleased to have freshman Kate Wasmer join the effort to help organize this spring's event. Olmsted hopes that after she graduates next year, Wasmer and others will keep similar awareness events going on campus.

Olmsted's inspiring commitment to her cause was evident at last March's event, as she headed to the podium to speak to her fellow IWU students. She had planned to tell her story only briefly as part of that night's program. But when two other guest speakers from Chicago were unable to travel because of a snowstorm, she rewrote her planned five-minute speech to serve as the evening's keynote address.

In a shaky but determined voice, Olmsted shared with the audience the painful first moments of learning about her sister's death, her daily struggles to cope with the loss, her feelings about the driver of the car, and her determination to continue to speak out against drunk driving.

When she finished, Olmsted was wrapped in many hugs from members of the audience, several of whom had been moved to tears by her words.

Olmsted's mother Sandy and father Gerry felt especially proud of their daughter for giving the emotional talk just days after the sixth anniversary of the car crash that took Erin's life. “Kate learned a big lesson six years ago, that things don't always turn out the way you think,” says her mother. “When others might have just cancelled the event, they stayed up all night and figured out how to make it work without the planned speakers.”

“Kate talks from the heart,” she adds. “Her friends and acquaintances know that she is the person to call, if they’ve had too much to drink and don’t want to drive.”

Olmsted has come to the point where she can feel some sympathy for drivers who have caused accidents while drinking and are tormented by the consequences of what they’ve done. But she still struggles with her feelings toward one particular driver.

This driver was featured in a video that Burnette played at the Hansen Student Center event. A handsome young man, he said in the film that not a day passes when he doesn’t think of the young woman who died in the crash caused by his drinking. As he expressed remorse for his actions, one could almost feel sorry for the man, until the video ended and Burnette revealed who had been the victim of the accident he caused. It was Olmsted’s sister, whose picture graced the podium where Burnette stood.

Olmsted chose not to view the film. Although she once considered the idea of having the driver join her to speak at an event, she realized, “Neither of us is ready for that. I don’t know if I ever will be.”

Part of Olmsted’s ambivalence is the result of the punishment the driver received: four months in jail (he later received a month off for good behavior). She finds that sentence hard to accept when she reads of others who are imprisoned for years for crimes that did not result in an injury or death.

That sense of injustice was shared by her family, who filed a wrongful death lawsuit against the driver in civil court. The legal process dragged out for a year and put an even greater strain on the family.

Part of the court-imposed sentence resulting from the civil suit requires the driver to talk about Erin’s death, and his remorse, on film and at events. On holidays where excessive drinking is common, he must walk in front of bars, carrying a picket sign against drunk driving and telling his story to patrons who ask what he’s doing. He also lost his driver’s license for seven years.

Not all the family’s requests were granted by the court, Kate said, but the driver has gone beyond the duty of some of the requirements by continuing to speak against drunk driving.

Olmsted says the end of court proceedings lifted a weight off her family’s shoulders, but still fell short of providing a real sense of justice. “There can be no justice for a violent act like this, no matter what the sentence is,” she told *The Argus* in 2001. “It doesn’t satisfy anyone.”

For worse and for better, Kate Olmsted knows the death of her sister will always have an impact on her life and the decisions she makes about it.

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It is with mixed emotions that she will perceive the big days she anticipates for her future: her college graduation next year and all the other upcoming milestones of her life will likely be bittersweet, because Erin won't be there to share them with her.

But the fatal accident that took her sister's life has also influenced Olmsted in positive ways. She has made firm plans to have her activism be an integral part of her future career. Her plans to become a high school teacher include being an advisor for Students Against Drunk Drivers and finding other ways to inspire teens to recognize and avoid the hazards of drinking and driving.

Olmsted says she has her own share of inspiring teachers at Illinois Wesleyan, including Vicki Magee and Dan Kuglich in Educational Studies and Kathleen O'Gorman in English. "They have the passion that it takes to be a great teacher and they are the kind of teachers that I would like to be. They are compassionate toward people and really want to make a difference, and I admire that," says Olmsted.

That respect goes both ways. Magee, who is also an assistant professor of psychology, sees qualities in Olmsted that will make her a good teacher. Magee's goal is to promote learning from the inside out, and she says Olmsted excels at that.

When Magee set up learning circles for her students to discuss ways to better understand the developmental life of their future students, Olmsted's group talked about how teachers can help students overcome grief from death or divorce. "She took a big risk and told about her sister's death. There was not a dry eye in the place," says Magee. "She has tremendous commitment to educating the rest of us about drunk driving."

There is encouraging news that Olmsted and others like her are making a difference. A report issued last December from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) stated that the number of fatal alcohol-related crashes involving teens has dropped by more than half in the last two decades. Education, stricter laws, and a shift in public attitudes toward drinking and driving all contributed to the change, according to the CDC study.

Olmsted, a member of Sigma Kappa sorority and the Student Education Association, is probably best known on campus for her activism against drunk driving but doesn't want to be pigeonholed by the issue. She says she doesn't avoid socializing where alcohol is present or having an occasional drink with friends. But even during these lighter moments, she sometimes finds herself worrying about the behavior of people around her.

"When I go out on a weekend and know that someone is going to drive a car when he or she shouldn't, it's frustrating," she admits. "Still, I can't let that stop me from continuing to do whatever I can do to let people know about these issues." And, she realizes, the best way to do that continues to be telling her own story, however painful that might be.

"Even now, I often get choked up in a presentation if it's been awhile since I've made one," she says. "But to talk about it a few times a year is also good for me. It's like therapy. If I don't do something, it's like it happened for no reason."

Phyllis Coulter Rasmussen moved to Bloomington with her family last fall after living in Europe for five years. A native of Canada, she worked for a newspaper in Ontario for over 10 years and freelanced in Canada and Denmark. She is a regional reporter for the Bloomington Pantagraph.

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