

# A mother's loss fuels fight against DUI tragedies

Annual Walk Like MADD and MADD Dash offers a place to grieve, heal and fight back



PHOTO BY MARK DUFFEL

Andrew Nicholas Ortiz's family designed this memorial for him.



PHOTO BY MARK DUFFEL

This year's Bakersfield Walk Like MADD and MADD Dash will be held Saturday, Sept. 13 at the Park at River Walk.



PHOTO BY MARK DUFFEL

This year's event will feature a kid's fun run and children's activities, a timed 5K run with medals for top finishers in age categories, food and other vendors, awards for top fundraisers, and a march by victims, their families and supporters.

BY JORGE BARRIENTOS

As the clock ticked down on the final moments of 2020, a celebration to mark new beginnings would end in irreversible loss for several local families with a single, tragic moment on New Year's Eve.

Before midnight struck, a car full of young friends sped through northwest Bakersfield, swerved, lost control, went over a concrete

median and slammed into a tree off Brimhall Road near Jewetta Avenue.

The crash killed Timothy Michael Wilson, Devin Lee Atha and Andrew Nicholas Ortiz, all 20 years old. A fourth passenger suffered minor injuries.

Investigators determined driver Adam Teasdale, 23 at the time, had blood-alcohol content of 0.17%



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

The family of Andrew Nicholas Ortiz at the Bakersfield Walk Like MADD and MADD Dash.

— more than twice the legal limit — and they found in the vehicle a canister of nitrous oxide, and a nearly empty bottle of Fireball Whiskey, according to court documents.

Sasha McKeen lost her beloved son, Andrew, a graduate of Stockdale High and "always a bright

light."

"I believe it was why God gave him red hair," his obituary read. "You knew he was coming, and you could feel the warmth before he even spoke to you. He was always polite and well-mannered, but he was always ready for an adventure."

"I knew before our loss that

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COURTESY OF THE FAMILY

**Andrew Nicholas Ortiz, 20, was killed by a drunken driver.**



PHOTO BY MARK DUFFEL

**At MADD's annual Walk Like MADD fundraiser, people remember their loved ones lost by the actions of drunken drivers.**



PHOTO BY MARK DUFFEL

**The fundraiser includes a kid's walk, 5k run and march.**



PHOTO BY MARK DUFFEL

**Speakers present at the fundraiser.**

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people drove impaired," McKeen said. "What I know now is that in a split second how devastating that decision can be for families."

McKeen said she felt lost and closed off to the world after Andrew's death, she said. Shortly after the crash, her attorney at the Law Office of Chain | Cohn | Clark connected her with local representatives of the Kern County chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Carla Pearson, its senior victim service advocate and a victim herself, who lost her 23-year-old son in 2002, would guide McKeen through the grief process, and the criminal court process for the first time.

And in September, Pearson encouraged McKeen to attend her first Bakersfield Walk Like MADD and MADD Dash, a fundraising 5K walk and run that brings together DUI crash victims and community members with the ultimate aim to end impaired driving crashes once and for all.

McKeen set up a memorial table for Andrew, and spent the day sharing his story, hearing other victims' stories from their loved ones, and hearing about how devastating impaired driving is in our community.

"It was incredible to see how many people were affected, and cared about those who were affected," she said. "I spent all day crying. If more people could see and feel what it's like to lose someone in this way without having to

lose someone, maybe we wouldn't have this problem."

She added: "It's so sad, and it's so preventable for people to make the smart choice. If people didn't drive impaired, we wouldn't have this problem."

In just the first half of this year — from January through June — Bakersfield Police Department made 387 DUI arrests and investigated 112 DUI collisions with seven fatalities. California Highway Patrol's Bakersfield Division has made 1,322 arrests and investigated 265 DUI crashes with 36 DUI fatalities. Currently, the Kern County District Attorney's Office is prosecuting more than 1,600 misdemeanor DUIs involving alcohol and more than 70 DUI felonies.

They are big numbers that are hard to digest, Pearson said, but it's important to remember that behind each crash is a family torn apart.

"They're mothers, sons, daughters, entire families shattered in an instant," Pearson said. "When someone drives impaired, they're not just taking a risk, they're taking lives. Our mission is to make sure no more families have to feel this kind of pain."

Many of the victims in crashes are innocent, and some of them even made the right decision. Earlier this year couple Max and Desiree Mooney, both 30, were killed in a suspected DUI crash in southwest Bakersfield while riding in a Lyft. Annabelle Correa



PHOTO BY MARK DUFFEL

**MADD's annual Walk Like MADD fundraiser includes medals for top finishers.**

allegedly ran a red light when she crashed into their Lyft, was unlicensed, and had a .088% blood alcohol concentration. She was charged with eight felonies, including second-degree murder.

Teasdale, in the crash that killed McKeen's son, pleaded no contest to three counts of gross vehicular manslaughter while intoxicated and DUI causing injury, and was sentenced in 2023 to six years in prison.

"MADD has helped a lot, and Carla Pearson is a saint," McKeen said. "She is a godsend to every family she has helped."

Since the first Bakersfield Walk Like MADD and MADD Dash in 2014, nearly \$700,000 has been raised to help local victims of DUI crashes, for educational programs in local schools, and help support MADD Kern County prevention

programs.

This year's event will be held Saturday, Sept. 13, at the Park at River Walk. It will feature a kid's fun run and children's activities, a timed 5K run with medals for top finishers in age categories, food and other vendors, awards for top fundraisers, and a march by victims, their families and supporters.

You can join McKeen and other local families at this year's walk by registering at [give.madd.org/bakersfield](https://give.madd.org/bakersfield). The cost is free to attend, \$35 for the walk and run (\$30 for youth), which directly funds the local MADD chapter in its mission.

*Jorge Barrientos is a board member for the MADD Kern County Advisory Board and chairman of the Walk Like MADD and MADD Dash planning committee.*