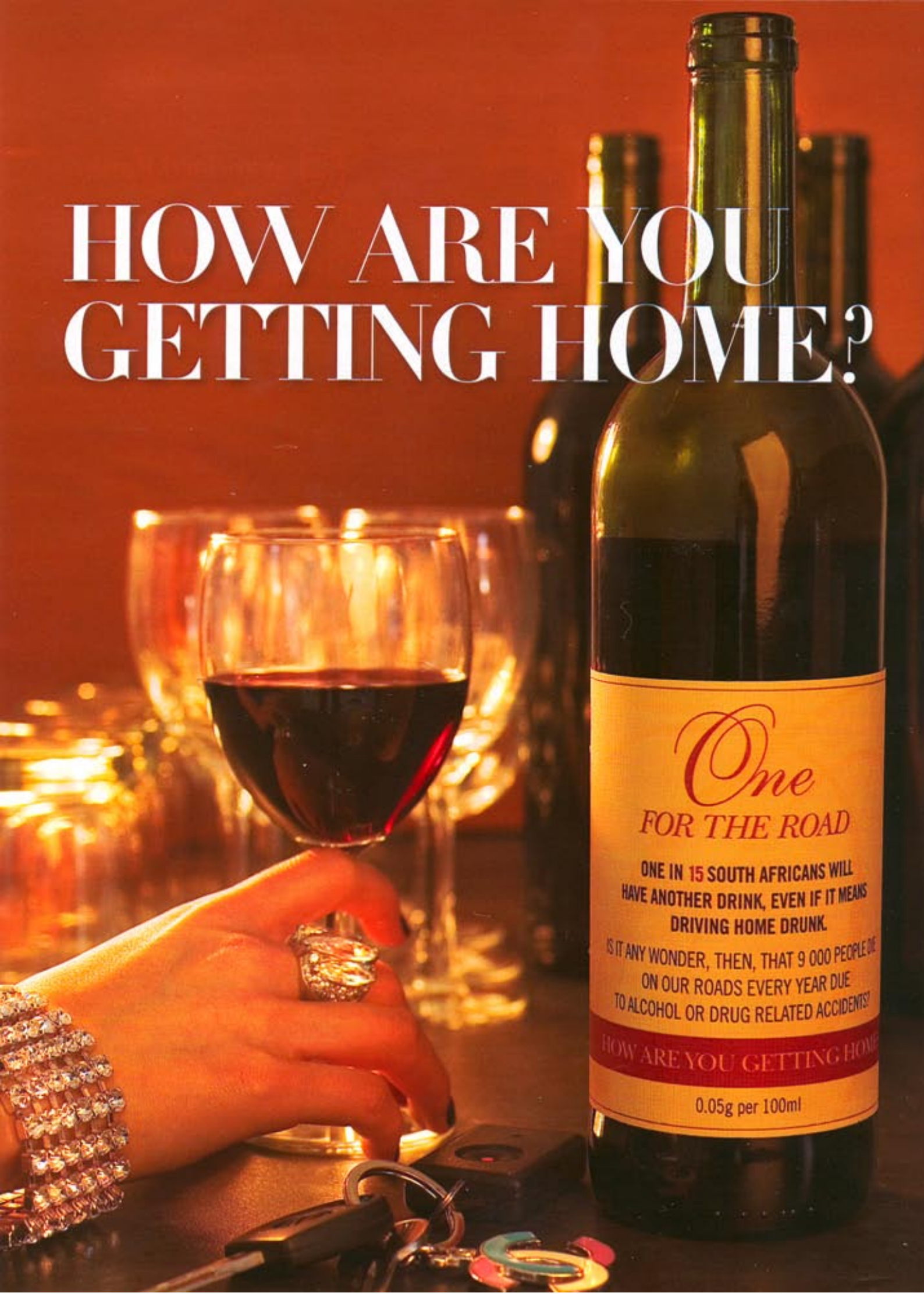


HOW ARE YOU GETTING HOME?



One
FOR THE ROAD

ONE IN 15 SOUTH AFRICANS WILL
HAVE ANOTHER DRINK, EVEN IF IT MEANS
DRIVING HOME DRUNK.

IS IT ANY WONDER, THEN, THAT 9 000 PEOPLE DIE
ON OUR ROADS EVERY YEAR DUE
TO ALCOHOL OR DRUG RELATED ACCIDENTS?

HOW ARE YOU GETTING HOME?

0.05g per 100ml

Spring brings long days, sundowners and after-work drinks. But as the booze starts to flow, so do bad decisions. Richard Kunzmann reports on SA's killer cocktail: drinking and driving.

This September marks the one-year anniversary of Plush guitarist Chas Smit's untimely death. The talented 23-year-old was killed in Pietermaritzburg when a car, impatiently overtaking a taxi, drove into him. When the driver was tested an hour later, she was still four times over the legal limit.

Then, on April 15 this year, hours before superstar Ashanti was due to sing for thousands of fans at a Joburg concert, her cousin Quinshac Snead was killed when her car was rear-ended and she was thrown into oncoming traffic. She was only 20 when she died and her killer, a 17-year-old joyriding in his mother's car, was not only an unlicensed driver, but also four times over the legal limit.

In the same month *Lost* star Michelle Rodriguez was convicted in Hawaii for drunk driving. It was her second conviction; the first time she was involved in a hit-and-run incident in Los Angeles. And hers is not an isolated incident of celebrity arrests for driving under the influence. Stockard Channing of *West Wing* fame, Chris Klein of *American Pie*, Backstreet Boy Nick Carter and *The Lake House* star Keanu Reeves have all been arrested on drunk driving charges. Even American

president George Bush was arrested back in '76, while model Caprice was charged with drunk driving in July '06.

Yes, the stars are guilty. But how many times have you heard friends laugh about not being able to remember getting home the night before? According to national road safety campaign Arrive Alive, about half of the estimated 18 000 fatalities on SA roads every year are caused by drunk drivers. Suddenly, the stories of crazy drunken rides home aren't quite so funny.

WHY DOES IT HAPPEN?

After the initial euphoria we experience after a glass or two of wine, alcohol starts to interfere with motor coordination and reaction time. It affects judgement and awareness, and blurs perception so that it becomes hard to gauge speed and distance. And confused messages from our inebriated bodies make us believe that we're driving better than we actually are.

Many of us have driven drunk at some point, but why do we go on doing it when we know we might kill ourselves, a friend or a stranger? Perhaps it's the kind of wonky logic applied by Joanne*, 26, a finance professional. Joanne admits she's frequently been irresponsible, but says, "Unless you don't

drink at all, you have no option but to get in your car and drive home. There's no safe and reliable transport system in SA."

Of course, we all know that this is no excuse. More efficient public transport would certainly make it easier and safer for us to get home when we're drunk, but the lack of it is still no excuse for driving when we're over the legal limit – thereby making the conscious choice to risk getting caught and, worse, to risk hurting someone.

Cultural and psychological factors play a role long before our transport infrastructure is to blame. Tobie Visser, the head of Stabilis (a treatment centre for substance abuse and alcohol), believes SA's runaway drunk driving problem is strongly connected to the positive reinforcement of drinking behaviour.

"South Africans seldom have one drink; binge drinking is fast becoming the norm in a country where people don't face social sanctions for intoxication," he notes.

People are more likely to react with laughter when you talk about how sloshed you got last weekend, rather than with shock or disgust, as would most likely happen in countries such as Australia and England, where ▶



THE DEADLY FACTS

- Of the 18 000 people who die every year on our roads, about half are killed in alcohol and drug related accidents.
- In America (a country six times our size), there were only 12 874 fatalities caused by drunk driving in 2004. In England it was 590 in the same year.
- There has been a 20% annual increase in the number of drunk driving arrests.
- There is a 3 300 case backlog of drunk driving incidents, meaning victim's families often have to wait more than 18 months to go to court.
- Drunk driving costs the country about R38-million a year. Yet the conviction rate remains around only 6%.
- Between Mar '05 and Apr '06 1 920 people were arrested for drunken driving in roadblocks in KwaZulu-Natal alone.
- According to Gary Roland of the AA, the maximum penalty for driving under the influence of intoxicating substances is six years' imprisonment or a R120 000 fine.

drunk driving has been controlled through tough legislation and strict reinforcement of penalties. "It's an attitude problem," notes Tobie. "People feel invincible as long as they've never been in an accident or arrested — particularly when the drinking starts."

Although 25-year-old student Letia has seen what could happen to drunk drivers, it still hasn't changed her behaviour. "One Saturday, when my boyfriend and I had probably had too much to drink ourselves, we almost rammed into a stationary car in the middle of a dark intersection."

"The driver's head was slumped onto the steering wheel and we thought he'd been shot. In fact, he was so drunk that he'd passed out while driving. When we woke him he said he thought someone else had been driving!"

The experience shocked her into drinking more responsibly, but Letia admits that she nevertheless sometimes still slips over the limit. "It's never as bad as it was, but it's difficult to know when you're over the limit or not," is her rationalisation.

When we were younger many of us saw our parents driving over the limit and heard the reasoning, "I've been doing this for years. I know how to drive with a few drinks in me." And Karin*, 26, a healthcare professional, believes that, "It's peer pressure all over again. When everyone else is drinking, you go on drinking with them."

Joanne reckons it's her inability to say 'no' that's the problem. "By the time I've had my second drink the possibility of killing someone in a car accident is the furthest thing from my mind."

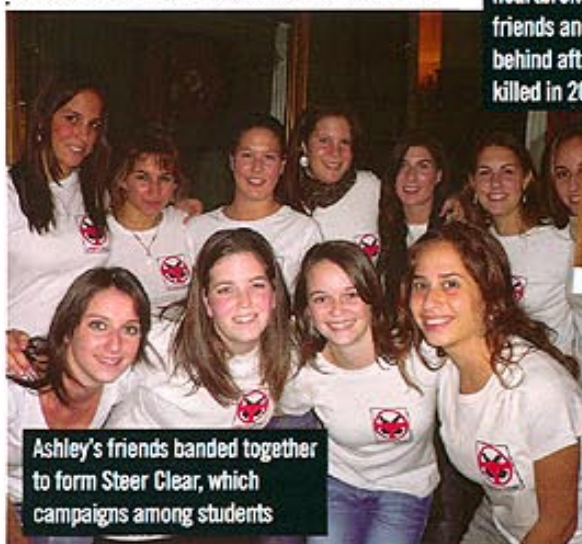
WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO STOP?

Among the scores of family, friends and fans that Chas Smit left behind,

are his mother Caro and his girlfriend Brenda Vos, 27.

Brenda remembers the day she found out that Chas was gone forever. "I was on a camping trip. The moment I saw that beautiful place, I wanted to share it with Chas. But he'd been killed shortly after midnight the night before, and I only got the call at seven in the morning. I was in absolute shock. Flying down to Cape Town to be with his family was almost unbearable."

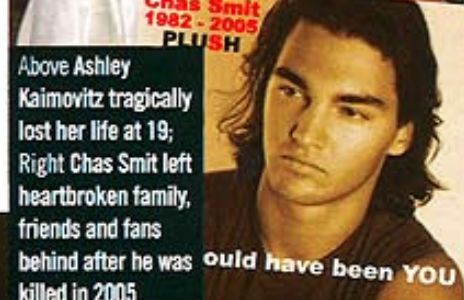
Eight months after the accident, Caro is still battling with the loss. "It's like a part of my body's been amputated," she says. "All I know is that I've lost Chas and the woman who killed him



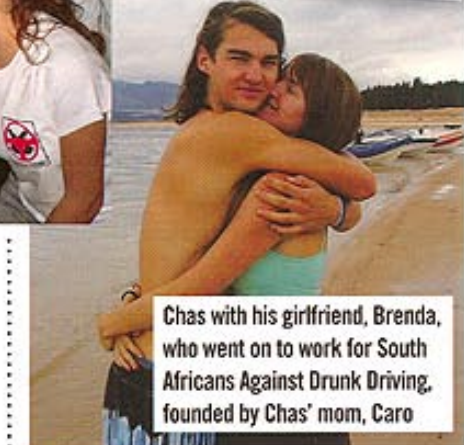
Ashley's friends banded together to form Steer Clear, which campaigns among students

is still free. I'm angry because she killed someone that I loved, but I can't judge her for what she did because we've all driven drunk at some stage. But do we all have to kill someone or lose someone before we realise how dangerous drunk driving is?"

Ironically, Chas' death wasn't the first time Brenda's had a brush with the aftermath of heavy drinking. When she was 16, her brother Shaun and a friend Byron were walking home after a party when a car smashed into them. "Byron died instantly; Shaun ended up in a wheelchair and had to learn how to speak, read and write again. And he'll never walk properly now," says Brenda.



Above Ashley Kaimovitz tragically lost her life at 19; Right Chas Smit left heartbroken family, friends and fans behind after he was killed in 2005



Chas with his girlfriend, Brenda, who went on to work for South Africans Against Drunk Driving, founded by Chas' mom, Caro

Brenda and Chas' mom Caro, a social worker, have turned their anguish into action. Caro founded South Africans Against Drunk Driving (SADD) in January 2006 to create awareness of SA's drunk driving problem and to fight for tougher legislation, more frequent testing and the dogged prosecution of drunk driving cases, while Brenda takes SADD's campaign to schools and campuses. ▶

Brenda's message is certainly one that Cape Town students Romy Kruger, Jae Braun and Carla Green have taken up. They lost their friend Ashley Kaimovitz in a drunk driving accident in March last year. At 19, Ashley had a promising future – starting with a bursary to study film at a prestigious Australian university.

The three friends banded together to form Steer Clear, which is affiliated

an event in May where people could enjoy live bands, but also learn more about how to use breathalysers and the effects of alcohol. "We weren't educated about drunk driving at school," says Romy. "We were told not to do it, but no one seems to know where the line is. When we breathalysed people at our event, no one had seen a breathalyser before." Scary, considering breathalysers should be a must-have in all cubbyholes.

for treatment, didn't go to jail, or even have their licence suspended!"

None of the women we interviewed had ever been in a roadblock or been breathalysed. "I work with a guy who has a serious booze problem," says Joanne. "He's been stopped four times, drunk as hell, but he's never been breathalysed, never been fined or prosecuted. And he brags about it."

Evidence shows that illegal behaviour is curbed when there's a speedy charging system and a certainty of prosecution. "We need more enforcement, more testing and an increase in the level of convictions," says Johan Joncke of Arrive Alive.

And, he says, more enforcement and breathalysers are on their way. "Now is the time to curb your drinking habits, or at least self-test with affordable breathalysers before heading home."

It's a matter of time before the government cracks down on drunk drivers. But ideally, it shouldn't be fear of arrest that urges us to drink responsibly. It should be consideration for ourselves, our families and people around us. The reality is that one more drink could mean one more death. ☹

*Names changed.

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to SADD. Like Brenda, Steer Clear campaigns among students to teach them about the dangers of drunk driving and to help change a culture that sees it as cool, even heroic, to survive a drunken night on the town.

THE BEGINNING OF CHANGE

"We're realistic," says Brenda of her work with SADD. "We don't tell people to stop drinking. We ask them to drink responsibly." Steer Clear hosted

Education takes time, but what can we do in the meantime to make sure that the carnage ends sooner rather than later? As Caro sees it, "It's simple: drunk driving is not an accident. It's a choice. People know they probably won't get caught. And if there is a roadblock, the chance that they'll be tried and convicted is even slimmer. SADD has heard of cases where people have been caught driving drunk for the fifth time and were still only fined R10 000 – they weren't sent



GET HOME SAFELY AFTER A HEAVY NIGHT OUT

- If you're going out in a group, elect a designated driver who abstains from alcohol that night. Pay for parking, meals and soft drinks and buy flowers as a show of gratitude. This person is saving lives!
- If you're over the limit call Goodfellas (0861 433 552), a taxi company that will drive you home in your own car.
- Test yourself! Keep disposable Redline Breathalysers in your car. At R42.75 for five, it's one of the best investments you can make. Call 021 853 7728 or visit www.redlinetest.com for details.

KNOW YOUR LIMITS!

- The legal alcohol limit is 0.05g per 100ml of blood.
- An average woman who's eaten before drinking can drink one unit of alcohol (340ml beer, 90ml wine or 25ml spirits) per 90 minutes.
- Eat *before* drinking to slow down the absorption rate of alcohol.
- Body weight, hydration, medication and fatigue all affect your level of intoxication.
- Check out www.sadd.org.za and www.arrivealive.co.za for more info, or contact Steer Clear at steerclear@gmail.com.

IF THERE'S AN ACCIDENT

- Quietly ask the responding officers to test for alcohol and take down their names and numbers for future reference.
- Never argue with, or accuse the other driver of being drunk. Road rage, alcohol and accidents often go hand in hand.
- If the other driver leaves the scene, take a picture of the car or note the registration number.
- Some drivers drink alcohol after an accident to confound tests. They'll argue they came under the influence *after* the incident. Don't try to take the drink away, but include what you see in the statement.