

Close call DWI teaches lesson without tragic cost

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Last Thursday, I pleaded guilty to driving while intoxicated.

You are supposed to start a column with something that grabs the readers attention, so there it is.

This semester I have been writing columns that were fun and interesting for me. They were directly related to events in my life. This is one column I wish I had no personal experience with. For two months I've debated even writing it.

Immediately after the incident I was determined to pass on my experience so that some of you out there would think twice about drunken driving.

After Laura Cockson died in March, I wanted to forget this column idea. I didn't want to put myself in a category with Jeffery Ireland.

After thinking about it further, I decided this column would do more good for the campus than it would cause personal embarrassment for me.

This article is in no way meant to downplay the death of Laura Cockson. Her unfortunate death has made the people of this campus see the pain and suffering that drunken driving can cause.

I hope this campus has since taken the issue of drinking and driving to the level of seriousness that it deserves. If you haven't, I'm going to teach you some facts that might elevate your thinking on this issue.

On Feb. 7, I was pulled over by a Lincoln police officer. I had been out drinking with my friends earlier that night and was on my way home. When the officer approached my car I had my license and registration ready for her. It never crossed my mind that I was intoxicated.

I was asked if I had been drinking that night. I told the officer I had had a couple of beers. I went through the alphabet and through a series of other tests. At the conclusion of these tests the officer told me she would like me to consent to a Breathalyzer test. I blew over the legal limit for operating a motor vehicle.

Every year you see countless statistics about drinking and driving; statistics that tell you about the amount of money and the number of lives drunken drivers cost this country.

These statistics were meaningless to me two months ago. I had never known anyone who was injured by a drunken driver; I had never experienced any loss because of alcohol. These statistics were meaningless to me because they were just that—statistics.

Statistics did nothing to sway me from drinking and driving in February. I'm sure I even drove past a billboard that reminded me to "designate a sober driver." These items aren't as effective as the organizations teaching them would like them to be.

Having a personal experience with drinking and driving is not something I enjoyed. I have learned to deal with my mistake and see the outcome of such an offense on a personal level. I would like to pass on this information to those of you who don't know the particular punishments that go with a DWI.

After I failed my Breathalyzer I was taken to detox. If you want to see what hell is like, just go down to detox for a while.

You enter the holding cell, and all you can smell is urine. The walls are all concrete, and it is freezing in the cell. I took a seat on the floor in the corner while I waited for my roommate to pick me up. Thank God the other occupants of the cell were sleeping.

About 10 minutes into my stay, a guy stumbled out of the sleeping area and began to pound on the door. He was yelling about his constitutional rights and about false imprisonment. I looked up from the corner at this guy and saw something missing in his eyes.

The kind of something that stops a man from killing a guy like me who looks at him funny. Some of the guys running the detox center came in and physically subdued the man. After he calmed down, they left. They left him in there with me. He attempted to make me his new friend. Right about when he was getting irritated again, the door opened and I saw my roommate.

If you ever experience some time in detox, you'd think it was punishment enough for any crime. The next week I hired a lawyer at the bargain price of \$250. When I say bargain, I'm not being sarcastic. I got a half-price discount because my lawyer is an alumnus of my fraternity.

After being charged with a DWI, you get a temporary license for 30 days. After the 30 days are up you lose your license for 90 days, according to the Department of Motor Vehicles policy. This suspension is automatic unless you can prove the officer didn't have reasonable cause to pull you over.

At the end of these 90 days you get to apply for a license reinstatement. The reinstatement fee is \$95 plus \$15 for a new license. You must take both the written and driving test again.

These above mentioned punishments are just from the DMV. The court sanctions are as follows: For a first offense you can get probation. The probation is anywhere from three months to a full year. You can get probation only if you have no previous infractions, otherwise it is a minimum seven days in jail.

The fine for your first DWI is a minimum of \$200 to a maximum of \$500. It is my understanding that the state legislators are now trying to raise the minimum fine to \$500. The courts also have a minimum license suspension of 60 days. This can be served simultaneously with the DMV 90-day suspension.

Probation is done on a case by case basis. You have to go down to the probation office and fill out this 150-question test to analyze your alcohol and drug problem. The questions on this thing are quite scary.

Here's an example: Recently I have felt like I was: a) a danger to myself (suicide); b) a danger to others (homicide); c) both a and b; d) neither.

Probation consists of a minimum of six Saturday morning alcohol education classes. The same people who answered "c" to the above question are now sitting to your left and right every Saturday for a month and a half.

All of these punishments are nothing compared to the fact that you now have a DWI on your criminal and driving records.

A lot of employment opportunities are now shut off to you. Your car insurance is going to skyrocket. People you know won't look at you in the same way they used to.

Mentally, you are going to be beating yourself up over the mistake. I am smarter than my behavior that day would indicate.

Your mind replays that night. If you had just stayed at your friend's place; if you had been driving slower; if you hadn't even gone out that night. It takes a long time to accept the situation and the fact that you can't do anything about it.

I am thankful for two things about this incident. The first thing is that I didn't hurt myself or others on that night. In February, a 23-year-old man from Kearney was charged with two counts of vehicular manslaughter. He was driving while intoxicated when he lost control of his Chevy Suburban and rolled it. The two friends who were with him died that night. His life is forever changed.

The second thing is that I have the type of personality that allows me to live and learn from my mistakes. I will never consume alcohol and drive again. The punishment you go through is not worth sleeping in your own bed for one night.

I am on day 32 of 90 without a driver's license and, believe me, it sucks. I will have spent almost \$700 before this is over, and that doesn't include the insurance increase that will be coming.

The next time you see one of your friends attempt to drive after drinking propose the following to him or her:

Tell the individual to give you his or her car for 90 days and \$700, and then hit them in the head with a hammer. That is what basically happens when you get caught.

That is, if you don't kill someone.



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"The other night I went on a bar crawl, and it was so awesome. I mean, I had 20 shots—at least that's what my friends told me the next morning because I passed out and don't really remember a thing.

"Then I went to some party, I think, and made out with this chick. I forget her name. I think we might have shagged, but I'm not really sure. All the guys said I can drink a lot. That was the best, man."

"Oh yeah? Well, I got so trashed in high school, I threw up on my mom. Man, she was pissed. I had at least half a bottle of vodka, and I needed my stomach pumped. I can drink even more now, you should have seen me the other night. ..."

"That's nothing, dudes. The other night I got so hammered I couldn't even drive straight, but I was like 'What the hell!', got in my car and killed this UNL student."

Of course, these are all made up, but I have heard variations of similar stories for the last 10 years.

I guess they are called war stories. People telling each other how much they can drink and tales of whiskey bottles and keg stands.

All these accounts and stories share one commonality: They make me sick. In Germany, with its lenient drinking laws, I have been around alcohol since I was in sixth or seventh grade. It was "cool" to drink.

I remember a friend of mine getting his first "Don't drink and drive" lesson when he tried to ride his bike home after a party and slammed into a street light. We were both 12, and it was the time when peer pressure started building on me because I have never had a drink in my life.

The pressure still has not stopped. On countless occasions people here have tried to sway my opinion on drinking and told me we should go out and have a beer or two or 20.

I could tell you it was very difficult to stand against what everybody else was doing, but it would be a lie. Most of the time saying no to alcohol was fairly easy, simply because I despise the product and disrespect anybody abusing it.

In my opinion, nothing good comes from alcohol.

In my entire life I have not had a single good alcohol experience. I pity people who need to drink to be able to interact with others (or whatever other lame excuse they have for drinking). I despise aggressive and abusive drunks who get in other people's faces.

But, most of all, I am concerned for all the alcohol consumers out there who don't see they have a problem.

I'm not talking about everybody who drinks, I know many people who consume alcohol responsibly and do not depend on it in any way. Still, there is the majority of others who have an alcohol problem.

Maybe it is not what a doctor would call

No pity Getting 'hammered' proves nothing

alcoholism, yet it is a problem.

It is a social disease that some people have to drink to feel happy, cool or secure enough to interact with others. If you have to chuck a couple shots to get in a good mood, maybe you weren't supposed to be in a good mood that night.

Everybody knows consuming alcohol has physical and psychological effects. The brain slows down and people get careless because defense mechanisms, which I assume we have for a reason, are switched off.

Most of the vandalism crimes and the majority of assaults and sexual assaults on this campus take place when alcohol is involved.

The first time I heard about "women drink free" at some fraternity parties, I laughed. I thought it was kind of funny. In my opinion, the invitation could have said, "Women, get trashed for free and maybe later we can hook up or take advantage of you in some other way."

See, I thought it was a joke, fraternities making fun of themselves and their bad reputation. Then somebody told me it wasn't a joke, and I stopped laughing.

It should be clear to anybody that you don't get something for nothing. Strike two, I was wrong again. Free booze seems to be very appealing to some, no matter what the cost might turn out to be at some other time.

On one hand, I really don't care. If you drive drunk and kill yourself—too bad, your fault, I don't care. If you get hammered and do something stupid to yourself the same applies. A girl who loses control and gets date raped—I'm sorry for you, but you should have kept your guard up and stayed sober, so don't come to me for pity.

On the other hand, I'm worried about all the innocent victims of alcohol abuse. Children, spouses, the guy who wanted just one drink at a bar and got picked on by a bunch of drunk guys, or all the other people who are hit on, molested or whose freedom is interfered with in any way.

I'm especially concerned about the ones I love and care for.

I didn't know Laura Cockson, but I have the utmost sympathy for her family and friends. She died a needless death and should still be alive.

I'm afraid it could happen to someone I know. I'd hate to see them end up as victims, but I'm just as scared they would get themselves in trouble because their minds are clouded by alcohol.

I'm worried every time I know one of my friends goes out to get drunk. I hope they do not make the same mistakes others have made. I hope they will not get raped, fight or end up driving and killing someone. It is the type of agony that cannot be described to someone who has never experienced it.

In some ways, I disrespect anybody who drinks too much because I have no respect for people who knowingly do something to themselves that is bad for them.

In my opinion, getting hammered is just what the word indicates. It is like taking a hammer and hitting yourself in the head a few times,

just because it is "the cool thing to do" and it makes you "happy" and it is easier to meet people." Who cares about the brain cells lost in the process?

Still, the disrespect and pity is outweighed by concern.

As much as I might hate to see the people I love go out and get drunk, I'm just that happy and relieved when they don't wreck their lives or the lives of others that night.



MELANIE FALK/DN