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At Dallas conference, MADD targets initiative seeking lower drinking age

03:48 PM CDT on Saturday, September 6, 2008

By **STEPHANIE BUTTS** / The Dallas Morning News
sbutts@dallasnews.com

A recently launched initiative by many university presidents calling for open discussion on lowering the drinking age is a threat to public health and safety, Mothers Against Drunk Driving leaders said Saturday in Dallas.

At its national conference at the Hilton Anatole hotel in Dallas, MADD hosted a panel discussion called "Why 21?" to discuss the movement to lower the drinking age from 21 to 18.

Discussion centered on the Amethyst Initiative, a statement launched in July and signed by 130 university presidents asking elected officials to reconsider the drinking age and seek ways to educate young adults on the uses of alcohol, according to its Web site.

Chuck Hurley, chief executive officer of MADD, said he believes that the initiative is little more than a cry for help by university presidents frustrated by their inability to get a handle on the problem of underage drinking on campuses.

"I think the initiative has become an embarrassment to the presidents who signed it," Mr. Hurley said.

MADD president Laura Dean-Mooney said the list of universities whose presidents have signed on to the initiative is useful for another reason — those are schools she won't allow her daughter to attend.

But Dr. Louis J. Agnese Jr., president of the University of the Incarnate Word and among those who signed the initiative, said the issue partly boils down to fairness. It's not fair that youths who are old enough to die for their country do not have the right to drink alcohol until age 21, he said in a prepared statement.

"An 18-year-old is allowed to vote, get married, enlist in the military and enroll in college because society accepts her or his ability to make decisions as an adult," he said. "We should be consistent and also respect their intellectual capacity to understand the responsibility that comes with drinking, just like we already do with voting, working, getting married, joining the military or attending college."

Ms. Dean-Mooney disagreed.

"This is not about rights and responsibilities," she said. "It's about public health and safety."

Mr. Hurley said that one of MADD's biggest challenges is presenting science to the public, because whatever data it offers is considered biased, Mr. Hurley said. He asked attendees to encourage medical

professionals and scientists to present their findings to the public.

Francisco Portilla, MADD volunteer from Puerto Rico has three sons and says it is an uphill battle educating them about alcohol. Mr. Portilla said he and his wife constantly tell their sons not to drink and drive.

“If it were me, I would raise it to 25,” he said.

THE CASE FOR 21

MADD facts in support of keeping the legal minimum drinking age at 21:

- Since the early 1980s, the number of young people killed annually in crashes involving drunken drivers under 21 has been cut in half, from more than 5,000 in the early 1980s to nearly 2,000 in 2005, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.
- In a July 2007 Gallup poll, 77 percent of Americans say they would oppose a federal law that would lower the drinking age in all states to 18.
- Traffic crashes are the No. 1 killer of teens, and 28 percent of fatal traffic crashes involving teen drivers are alcohol-related, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.
- In 2006, about 10.8 million people ages 12 to 20 (28.3 percent) reported drinking alcohol in the past month. About 7.2 million (19 percent) were binge drinkers, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

SOURCE: Mothers Against Drunk Driving