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**Drunken drivers made to hear of the pain
Victim Impact Panel's 4 survivors evoke tears**

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The man was drunk and behind the wheel, speeding down the hill, hitting 70 in a 35-mph zone, high beams glaring, closing in on a car containing Pat Knepper's 20-year-old son.

"This is not easy for me, so bear with me," Knepper said. The Grasonville woman set up a framed portrait of her late son, took a deep breath and, in a shaky voice, told her story.

Thirteen drunken drivers were in the audience, under court orders, to hear Knepper say: "The pain, believe me, it's unreal. It's like somebody ripping your heart out of you, you know? My son."

Knepper was, for the first time, participating in a Victim Impact Panel, a program designed to make an emotional pitch to prevent drunken drivers from repeating their mistakes. The panels have been used in Baltimore, Prince George's, Howard and Montgomery counties and now, thanks to Mothers Against Drunk Driving, in Anne Arundel County.

And if Knepper found the going tough Tuesday night in Crownsville at the first panel program in the county, imagine how the drunken drivers felt after hearing four anguishing true-life tales.

"Some stories hit me hard. Some parts really got me emotional," said 28-year-old Kiko Flores, whose eyes welled with tears during Knepper's talk. The Annapolis man, who was ordered to the program by Judge Martha F. Rasin, added, "I wasn't expecting to feel this way. I could've hurt someone."

Said another offender sentenced to the program, "I was just trying not to cry throughout the whole thing." The 25-year-old Arnold woman, who declined to give her name, vowed, "I definitely won't drink and drive again."

In the written comments required as part of the program, several other offenders said their eyes had been opened.

Knepper ended her talk by saying, "If I touched one of your hearts tonight or I saved a life by being here, then it was worth the pain I've been through and the tough time I had here tonight."

Michael E. Loney, a judge on the District Court in Anne Arundel County, saw one person he had sentenced at Tuesday's

program. "It's very worthwhile. It provides the court with an excellent alternative sentencing tool," he said.

Maureen C. Gillmer, director of the Victim-Witness Assistance Center of the Anne Arundel state's attorney's office, said District Court Judge Clayton Greene Jr. also has sentenced offenders to the Victim Impact Panel program. Gillmer said she had heard of the program being used elsewhere and had begun efforts to bring it to Anne Arundel County when she heard the Central Maryland chapter of MADD was already making similar arrangements.

Gillmer said the audience at Tuesday's presentation included some people who are considering telling their stories at future programs. Plans call for one program a month in the county.

The first speaker was Svend "Buz" Thomas, a former Navy man whose midshipman son was killed in a crash 11 years ago. After Knepper spoke about her son's death, it was former state trooper Vonzell Ward's turn to describe the pain he has felt since a drunken 17-year-old driver collided head-on with his police cruiser in 1981.

Ward said his left leg was broken in 33 places, his right leg in 34. He said his foot was left hanging from his leg by only a tendon. He said he was conscious after the crash and recalled how the teen-ager delivered a message after the crash.

"He looked me right in the face and said, 'You S.O.B. It's too bad I didn't kill you,'" Ward said. "The last 10 1/2 years have been a pure, simple living hell.

"It's more than the physical pain. It's the emotional and psychological part that just tears at you."

Paul DeAuon described how his two children were among 10 killed when a pickup full of teens careened off a county road in 1979.

After the speakers had told their stories, Thomas said, "I don't know how the other victims feel, but my being here really helped me." He then thanked the audience for coming.

No applause. Silently, the offenders began writing up their comments.

One person wrote: "Anyone who is not affected by the victims' situations has the sensitivity of a rock."

Graphics:

PHOTO 1

PHOTO 2

Caption:

Pat Knepper talks of the death of her son at the hands of a drunken driver. "This is not easy for me, so bear with me," the Grasonville woman said.

Retired Trooper Vonzell Ward breaks down while telling drunken drivers of how another intoxicated driver shattered both his legs 10 years ago.

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