HEART's message to BR: Drinking and driving not OK

By MIKE DUNNE
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Statistics support the idea that many drivers in East Baton Rouge Parish think it's okay to get behind the wheel after drinking.

In 1983, 53 people died in alcohol-related traffic accidents in the parish. More than 380 more people were severely injured in accidents involving drinking drivers. Some of those victims who arrived at hospitals in critical condition and later died are not included in the figures compiled by the Louisiana Highway Safety Commission.

Police arrested 1,459 people in 1983 for driving while intoxicated. In the first three months of this year, 1,021 arrests for DWI have been made, according to Jeff Wesley, information officer for the Police Department.

A coalition of groups in the parish want to change the sentiment that it's OK to drink and drive and it is planning an 18-month assault on that attitude.

The group is called HEART - Help End Alcohol-Related Tragedies in Baton Rouge.

According to Nancy Came of the Safety Council of Greater Baton Rouge, "we generally say 95 percent of all accidents are alcohol-related. Some pathologists have done studies which indicate as high as 95 percent," she said.

HEART has a message for the people of the area:
"Choose to Survive - Can You Afford to Drink and Drive?"

Getting arrested for DWI and arrived at a figure of $5,000-$7,000, including fines, legal fees, lost pay.

"People just don't know that," Calkins said.

"There's a choice to be made — in your life and another person's," said George Broach, who will head the awareness committee of HEART.

The group will focus on three other areas, education, a speakers bureau and corporate education to help employers help their employees.

Baton Rouge is one of 10 cities nationwide participating in a National Traffic and Highway Safety Administration program labeled "target of opportunity." The program is designed to make drivers aware of alcohol's effect and the potential for disaster by drinking and driving.

"We have a concerned message to get the community and we can strengthen our message by working together," Leslie Golden, director of the target of opportunity program, said.

The key to that message will be public participation and awareness, she said.

Baton Rouge already has "one of the newest group of volunteers," I Care, and HEART's efforts will dovetail into that program, Calkins said.

Calkins said he thinks the prevailing attitude in the area is that it's okay to drink and drive.

"That's what we believe. We know that people are going to drink. That's part of the culture down here," Calkins said.

Mr. Golden thinks drinking drivers are not "irresponsible... they are just not informed."

Broach said he hopes the campaign works to create an air of awareness to help "the guy who might have a six-pack on the way home" decide not to drink, thereby improving his reaction time, which could be the difference in hitting or missing a child at play.

Ms. Golden said the group has no funds and will rely on corporate in-kind contributions and volunteers to get the message out.

Areas to be addressed by the group include:
- General awareness through the use of public service advertisements, billboards and use of the media to explain the many aspects and consequences involved in the decision to drink and drive.
- A speakers bureau for any group interested.

Additional information is available by calling 389-5238.