USL professor active in campaign against drunk drivers

By JEFF KILGORE
News Editor

In recent months, there has been an increased awareness, both in Lafayette and throughout the state, of the problem of drinking and driving. The media has given more coverage to the problem, and the trend has been toward stiffer penalties for those convicted of driving while intoxicated.

One person who is involved in this issue is Dr. May Waggoner, a French professor at USL. She is active with the Lafayette chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Drivers. The organization was formed by Candy Lightner of Fair Oaks, California after her daughter was killed by a hit-and-run driver who had four prior convictions for DWI. The organization now has chapters in several states, and has helped to increase public awareness of the problem of drunk driving.

The local chapter was formed when Lightner came to Lafayette in January, 1982. In February, it merged with a group from a local church, Concerned Citizens, which had the same goals.

Dr. Waggoner told of the meeting where Lightner spoke. “I thought it was a little strange that they had a cocktail hour, but it was explained to me that it is not a temperance group,” she said. “They are not trying to get anyone to stop drinking; the idea is just to drink responsibly,” she added.

The local group, known as the Concerned Citizens chapter, is in the process of affiliating with the national organization. In order to qualify for affiliation, the group has done research on the drunk driving problem in Lafayette. Dr. Waggoner characterized this research as sometimes boring, but often very frightening. “In 1975, Americans consumed 28 gallons of beer per capita,” she stated. “In Lafayette Parish, the consumption was 41 gallons per person, half again as much as the national average,” she said.

“What we would like to do is to make the public aware of the danger and reshape their attitudes,” Waggoner said. “I’d like to go on record as saying the media has done a marvelous job of supporting our efforts by increasing public awareness,” she added.

“The group also helps victims and their families through a victim outreach program. This includes both emotional support and helping them deal with the judicial process so that the drunk driver will be punished rather than going free. For instance, the victim’s family can get the accident report and the person’s driving record, but not just anyone can do this. “If the paperwork is not in order, then a fourth offense, which may be the one where he kills somebody, may be treated as a first offense,” Waggoner said.

In addition, the group monitors the courts to see that they are carrying out their responsibilities. “If Judge X consistently throws out cases, or if a certain type person is not issued a bench warrant when they fail to appear in court, then we report back to the organization or the judge himself,” Waggoner stated. The group recently sponsored a DWI demonstration to show the dangers of drinking and driving. The mayor and several other people drove a pylon course while sober, and then repeated the course with a blood alcohol level of 0.10 percent, which is the legal limit of intoxication. “We had a couple who thought that it wouldn’t affect them and that they could do fine,” Waggoner said. “Well, they didn’t do fine at all.”

The group is not a political organization, but they have been active on a state and local level. They went on record as supporting the open container law and still support it, although they concede it will be tested in court. They also support the work of the Governor’s task force on drunk driving, which has recommended 10 bills to deal with the problem. One of the bills has passed, and the group is hopeful about the remainder.

The group has been active with the jail committee, supporting the district attorney’s effort to turn the old City Hall into a minimum security facility. “You can’t have a mandatory jail sentence if there’s no place for them to serve it,” Waggoner explained.

Waggoner is optimistic about the outlook for the future. “I think people are finally waking up and recognizing the problem,” she said. “More and more people are being touched by it,” she added. “If someone wants to stay home and do whatever he wants to, it’s his home, but once he gets on a public street, that’s my street too.”

The group will hold its next meeting on August 2 at 7:30 p.m. It will be held in the City Council Auditorium at City Hall, and the public is invited. The group may be contacted at P.O. Box 31402; Lafayette, La. 70503.