

MADD fundraiser supports awareness programs

By MEG FRASER

The mission of Mothers Against Drunk Driving hasn't changed much since it started in 1980, but in today's economic climate, their approach has.

"A non-profit is always looking for something that isn't work intensive but where people walk away and feel like they got something," said Rhode Island MADD Director Gabrielle Abbate.

Abbate is hoping guests feel that way when they leave MADD's Show Your Cause fundraiser on Friday, June 18. The beachfront hotel, Ocean House, is hosting the event at no cost to MADD as part of a Show Your Cause series of events to benefit area charities.

"It is a wonderful way for MADD to make use of the Ocean House to raise funds at no expense to the organization," Ocean House Head of Real Estate Donna Simmons said in a release.

When a MADD victim family first approached Abbate with the idea, she was hesitant. Tickets to the tour, trunk show and luncheon are \$75, and she wasn't sure if supporters would be willing to shell out that much.

With the event on the horizon, Abbate is glad she gave the green light.

"We've been really, really pleasantly surprised at the amount of support that this event is getting," she said. "I just think it's wonderful."

MADD expects to raise at least \$2,000 based on their ticket sales so far. That money will go towards continuing services and programs that the non-profit offers at no cost to both victim families and schools. Victim services include research for court cases, and school programs warn young people of the dangers of underage drinking and substance abuse.

"This helps us keep that alive," Abbate

said.

MADD considers drunk driving a threat to public health, and believe it should be treated as such. Abbate describes it as a "non-discriminatory" crime, which is why the organization aims to reach high schoolers across the state. MADD generally visits about 20 schools in a year, and they hope to soon offer their educational sessions to middle schools and even elementary schools.

Conversations about the dangers of drinking, Abbate said, should not wait until late teens. The age of experimentation has steadily crept up, and now puts students barely in middle school when they first try alcohol.

"Own it," Abbate advised parents, "Take it upon yourself to sit down and talk with your child and talk about the consequences. It's about setting up that consequence and following through."

A mother herself, Abbate says it's not an easy conversation to have, but parents should reinforce the laws. A common mistake, she said, is when parents talk about what to do *if* the child chooses to drink.

"As a parent you can't pick and choose what laws you want your child to follow. How do you expect them to make a really good decision when they're under the influence?" she asked.

Spring is a particularly busy season for MADD, as they visit schools preparing for prom and graduation. Rhode Island's statistics are particularly troubling, with drunk driving figures about the national average.

"If it looks like our work is done I still don't think we can back off," Abbate said. "If we weren't banging on peoples' doors, if we weren't shouting out the message 24/7, I can only imagine how dangerous it would be."

To purchase tickets to the Show Your Cause event or for more information, call 315-5599.

