Founding MADD

Candace Lightner founded Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (now Mothers Against Drunk Driving) in 1980. She is an outspoken leader of the movement to reduce DWI fatalities through tougher laws and penalties, public education, and media attention.

![Cari Lightner](image)

Until the 1980s, drinking and driving were pleasures that Americans mixed freely because of a tacit leniency that permeated our culture. How do Cari Lightner’s personal objects reflect your decision to challenge social and legal norms?

I started MADD in May 1980, four days after my daughter, Cari, was killed by a multiple repeat offender drunk driver, I was shocked to learn that over the prior decade 250,000 people were killed in alcohol related crashes and each year 660,000 more people were injured. At that time, public health professionals considered drunk driving to be the number one killer of Americans between the ages of 15 and 24.

I also learned that probably nothing would happen to the man who killed my daughter. So I became a grass roots activist. Cari’s objects are a constant reminder that hundreds of thousands of innocent people died from a very preventable tragedy. My work with MADD was a great way to deal with the anger and rage I had after she died. It didn’t help as much with the grief because I didn’t want to be seen as a hysterical mother and not taken seriously.
The license plate that you donated to the National Museum of American History reads “I AM MADD.” Starting with one person, how did MADD become a national and international movement?

The beginning of MADD is a case study of anger about injustice inciting people to action. You kick a few pebbles, you turn a few stones, and eventually you have an avalanche. My "kicking a few pebbles" began in my home with the help of my father and a few friends.

However, three short years later, the country was faced with an avalanche of protest from the long forgotten victims of the country's most often committed crime. It may have started as a "one woman show," but within the first three years it developed into an international organization with almost 400 chapters worldwide, a staff of 50 employees, 2 million members, thousands of volunteers and an annual budget of more than 12 million dollars. I think we hit a nerve and focused attention on an issue that was solvable.

MADD was more than an influence on legislation or a group of picketers on television. It was a way of acknowledging each and every victim of drunk driving. We gave mothers and fathers the opportunity to memorialize their children. To us, that child's death or injury was not just
another statistic, it was a call to action. Our advocacy comforted innumerable families with emotional support and practical information about the judicial and legislative process. We brought victims together to discuss their feelings and we were by their sides when they went to court. We became a model for other organizations to follow.

What were MADD’s major accomplishments during its first five years?

• Governor’s task forces on drunk driving were formed in almost every state

• At our urging, President Ronald Reagan initiated a Presidential Commission on Drunk Driving, and I was a member

• MADD was the catalyst for SADD, Students Against Drunk Driving, started by my daughter, Serena

• Sobriety checkpoints became the norm rather than the exception. Studies show that checkpoints reduce alcohol-related crashes by 18-24%

• We now have Drunk and Drugged Driving Awareness Month in December
• We aggressively lobbied for state and federal legislation that would raise the legal drinking age to 21, and we passed laws that would hold drunk drivers accountable for their crimes

• By 1985, more than 729 state laws pertaining to drunk driving were enacted at the state level, and the number of fatalities from drunk driving crashes dropped 20%.

• We implemented or initiated programs such as Project Graduation, Safe Rides, Designated Driver, Candlelight Vigils, and the Tang March Across America.

• In 1983, “Mothers Against Drunk Drivers: the Candy Lightner Story” was launched on NBC

• Most importantly, more than 400,000 lives have been saved since MADD started

• The most astonishing fact of all is that we changed attitudes. People don't laugh at drunk driving anymore, and society no longer considers impaired driving acceptable

What do you find most remarkable about MADD’s ability to change ingrained social behavior?

MADD is considered by sociologists to be the most effective grass roots organization since the anti-Vietnam war movement. MADD is a good example of "people who coalesced around a shared belief and affected the shape of public policy."

For me personally, it was a challenge issued to me by traffic safety experts who said it would take more than ten years to change our acceptance and tolerance for drinking and driving. We did it in less than five.

What made a difference besides the determination of MADD activists? Other auto safety and temperance campaigns showed that it’s difficult to change public policy and behavior unless something dramatic happens.

Not to be overlooked is another extremely significant factor in reducing alcohol related crashes: the power of media attention. From 1980 to 1983, when MADD was at its most active and visible, some of the biggest reductions in motor vehicle deaths and death rates occurred, due in large part to the media attention we were able to generate. Jay Winsten, Director of the Frank Stanton Center for Health Communication at the Harvard School of Public Health, said in a New York Times article, “During each high media period, alcohol related fatalities, correcting the vehicle miles driven, fell twice as rapidly as low media periods.”

Also, I will never forget that when we had our first press conference in California, a horrendous drunk driving crash occurred killing nine people and seriously injuring another all members
from two families just before. The driver was a repeat offender with a record similar to the man who killed my daughter.

I think that due to that tragedy the press was more interested in the issue.

Do you ever wish that MADD were unnecessary and you could enjoy a normal family life without devoting your time to saving lives?

Sure. Would I take it all back to have Cari with me? In a heartbeat.