

## A Letter from the Editor – A judgement call

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**Prince Frederick, MD** - Two recent court sentencing hearings in Calvert County truly brought home the seriousness of the responsibility of driving and the need for drivers to be alert, considerate and above all else, sober. Because of state policy, cameras are not allowed in the courtrooms to either video or stream live or else the many who cannot attend, and might be moved by the proceedings could witness the sorrow and gravity of both occasions. Two families and a large extension of friends are all heartbroken and three lives are lost in two separate incidents that occurred last year.

The families of the guilty are also hurting as someone they love must spend considerable time in jail.

Naturally, after the impact statements are made, the attorneys—defense and prosecution—have had their say, after the defendants have had an opportunity to express regrets and apologize, and prior to the court of public opinion being gaveled into session, those who sit on the bench must decide an appropriate sentence.

Armchair jurists might think it's an easy call. A now-retired judge, facing a similar decision several years ago, declared rendering a “lock-the-door and throw-away-the-key” sentence would be an easy call to make. However, does society really benefit from that? In the case of drunk driving there is evidence there is no benefit. America has tried prohibition and it failed miserably. Throw a drunk driver who has caused the death of someone in jail for a lifetime and does it really deter a repeat of such an incident by another driver?

Imposing what seems to be a light jail sentence for someone who has no criminal past or has tried to mend his or her ways is not a “slap on the wrist.” In both instances, austere post-incarceration sanctions were imposed and measuring up to those mandates could prove more problematic for the defendants than simply spending a lengthy, unproductive time behind bars. The circuit court dockets in all three Southern Maryland counties are chockfull of violation of probation hearings. For career criminals, probation is appropriately a hellish minefield.

It's also easy for society to simply vilify someone who drives recklessly and causes the death of someone else. But how many of the scorners drink and drive themselves? A more productive approach might be to sober up yourself, step up to the plate and take the role and responsibility of being a designated driver seriously. It might also be more productive to reach out to someone you know who is struggling with an addiction—alcohol and/or drugs—beg them to seek help, or at least wrest the keys from their hands.

The days of the 'hanging judge' are in the past. Rather than lament it, society needs to find better ways to stop these tragedies from ever happening.

**The opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the management and staff of The BayNet.**

Contact Marty Madden at [marty.madden@thebaynet.com](mailto:marty.madden@thebaynet.com)

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