

# Van project could offer drunks a ride

It was announced recently that the old, brown Saferide van has been retired after years of transporting women at night. However, the vehicle will continue to be a familiar sight around the University, as it will soon ferry home intoxicated students safely.

Call it the drunk bus or Safe Drunk, but despite the jokes by detractors, the idea is an excellent one. It has the potential to save lives.

The issue is not whether drinking is right or wrong or whether additional steps need to be taken against minors who drink. The fact is there will always be some college students, regardless of age, who will choose to drink and get intoxicated. Something needs to be done to ensure that they can get home safely when they are drunk.

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A van to drive the intoxicated would provide yet another way for drunks to get home safely, rather than becoming a gruesome statistic the next morning. Taking into account the number of students who frequent local drinking establishments as well as those attending parties on the weekend, it's not difficult to imagine the potential demand for a program like this.

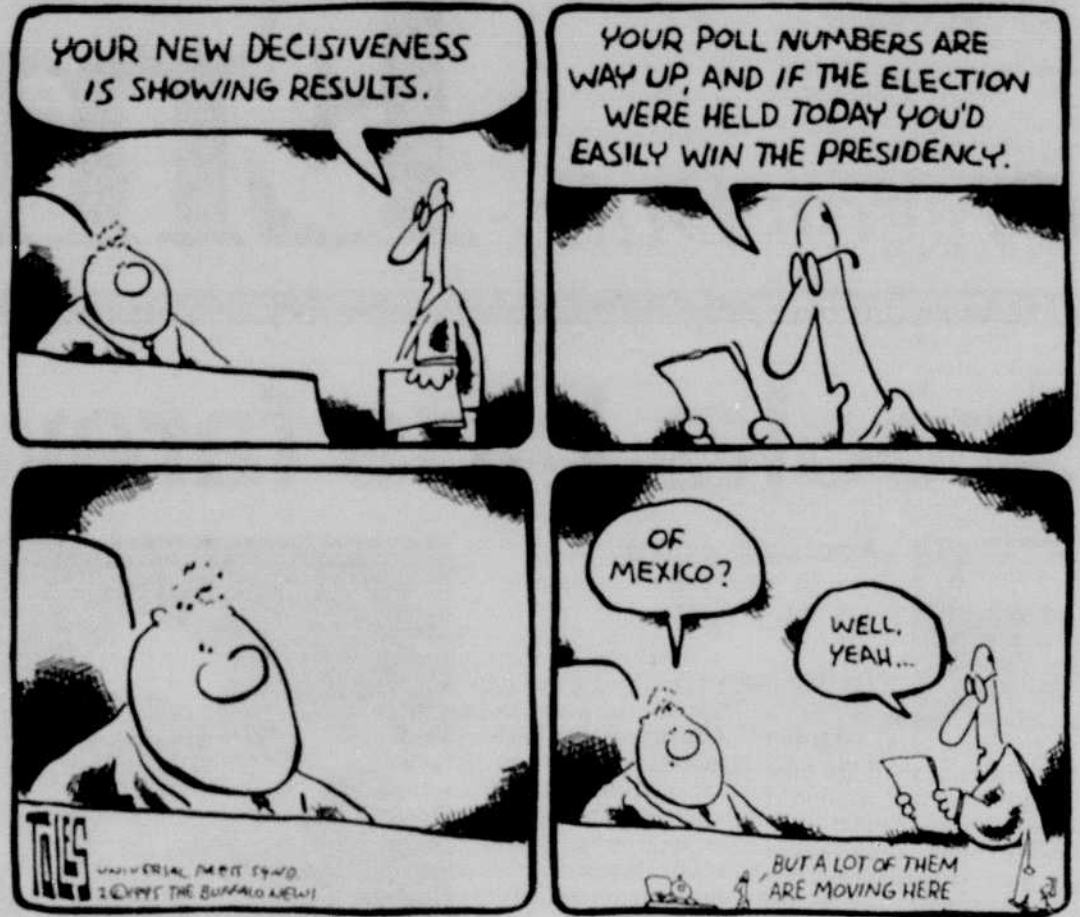
Drunk driving is a national tragedy, and intoxicated people have no business behind the wheel of a car. Thousands of people have been killed by drunken drivers. Even those who have had a few drinks and feel comfortable behind the wheel shouldn't be driving.

However, having a drunk person walk or bike home aren't necessarily smart alternatives, either. Intoxicated people are less able to defend themselves and are more likely to get disoriented on the way home than their sober counterparts. The last thing that the community needs is for drunk pedestrians to get hit by intoxicated drivers.

A number of safe options are available to drunks desiring to go home. The intoxicated can call a taxi, have a sober friend drive them or take the bus. They also can decide to sleep the night wherever they are — a potential inconvenience to some, but a much more pleasant prospect than winding up injured or dead from a preventable collision.

The van will be another option for those who need safe and reliable transportation home. The success of the program, much like that of Saferide, will depend on how well-known the program is and whether people take the time to use it. Promotion of the program will be key in determining whether transportation for the intoxicated will succeed as a project.

It also might work to a broader goal of making people feel comfortable in admitting that they are too drunk to get home without help. Students need to know that resources are available to help them when they need to leave a party or a bar intoxicated. Their lives might depend on it.



■ OPINION

## Firefighter deaths shock small community



REBECCA MERRITT

Rob Johnson was an accountant who took his summers off to fight fires. Jon Kelso was about to earn an engineering degree. And Tami Bickett had just bought a house with her fiancé.

Johnson, Kelso and Bickett were among nine Oregon firefighters who were trapped and died in a Colorado wildfire last summer. These young men and women grew up in small communities such as Burns, Lebanon and Roseburg, and they attended Oregon colleges. One of them, Kathi Beck, was a psychology major at the University.

Their love for protecting nature and taking risks brought them to my hometown, Prineville, to be members of the elite Hotshot crew. In a small community where no one goes unnoticed, their deaths were a painful shock. If you didn't know someone who died, you knew family members and friends whose lives were immediately scarred with pain.

The week they died was the week of our annual Crooked River Roundup. It's usually Prineville's grandest event of the year — the only time that local motels fill up. But at the rodeo parade, when members of the U.S. Forest Service led nine riderless horses symbolizing the fallen firefighters through Third Street, the town grew silent.

Even former Gov. Barbara Roberts couldn't hold back tears that afternoon when she spoke at a memorial service at my high school football stadium. No one was untouched by this tragedy. No one could understand how nine young, brave individuals

could lose their lives in what at first seemed to be a routine fire.

As an intern for the newspaper in nearby Bend, I was challenged to find out more about these individuals. I was assigned to call some of the surviving family members to find out who they were, what they had accomplished and what made them special enough to be included among the highest caliber of firefighters in the Forest Service.

Nervous because I was rubbing elbows with reporters from *People* magazine, *The New York Times* and other national media and saddened because I felt the suffering of an entire community, I quickly realized the importance of my assignment.

I talked to one father, Gene Johnson of Roseburg who had two sons, Rob and Tony, battling the Colorado blaze. Rob died but Tony made it home. Gene Johnson cried when he talked about Rob's long list of accomplishments and his caring nature. I couldn't even begin to understand how much pain he was experiencing.

But after talking to him and other relatives, his son became much more than just a name on the deceased list. He was an outdoor enthusiast, an intelligent CPA, a fraternity brother, a soccer player and a leader. He stood out among his peers. But so did the rest of the dead firefighters — that's why they were chosen for the elite Hotshot crew that was sent to the most dangerous fires.

For weeks after the deadly blaze, thousands of blue ribbons attached to car antennas, shrubs and shirts served as a sobering reminder of our town's mourning. Flags across the nation were flown at half-mast for 14 days — one day each for the nine Prineville firefighters and for the five other firefighters from Colorado, Idaho and Montana who also died on Storm King Mountain. It was impossible to drive

through Prineville or any of the neighboring communities without feeling a loss.

Firefighters from across the state went to the nine funerals. Some of the families held memorial services in amphitheatres and high school auditoriums to accommodate hundreds of mourners. After Bonnie Holtby's funeral in Redmond, more than 100 cars followed the hearse to Prineville where she was laid to rest.

Just as the town was starting to heal, a report of the incident released late in the summer deepened wounds. According to some media, the report seemed to blame the firefighters for their deaths. Escape routes were planned in case the fire exploded but the firefighters didn't use them. The report also called the firefighters cocky and overconfident, according to the media.

For survivors suffering an incredible loss, that report was a somber reminder of the tragedy. It left families and friends with more questions unanswered. It seemed even more impossible to make sense of the accident. After all, aren't firefighters supposed to be confident?

Last week the Occupational Health and Safety Administration cited the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management for procedure violations that contributed to the firefighters' deaths. The administration's investigation found that "plain indifference" toward the health and safety of employees from management is to blame for the accident. Firefighters weren't given adequate safety zones, escape routes, weather forecasts and information on expected fire behavior.

I'm glad that this tragedy wasn't forgotten and hopefully the families of victims can find some relief. Someone has to take responsibility to make sure this never happens again. Nine lives was a terrible price for my community to pay.

*Rebecca Merritt is the news editor for the Emerald.*

# Emerald

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