



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Christina Bruner, a senior at Elmira Notre Dame High School, is a member of SADD and Teens Encouraging Alcohol/Drug Free Messages in School.

## Elmira Notre Dame athlete scores in anti-alcohol role

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

ELMIRA — What Christina Bruner lacks in size, she more than makes up for with her relentless energy. Barely five feet tall, Bruner is an outstanding two-sport athlete who tackles many extracurricular activities with great enthusiasm.

Yet on the morning of April 29, the 18-year-old senior's demeanor was anything but bubbly. Instead, her schoolmates saw her limp and silent.

Bruner was one of five Elmira Notre Dame High School students "killed" in a dramatic, graphic skit staged outside the school to illustrate the potential consequences of driving while intoxicated.

The scene included ambulances and police cars pulling up to an "accident site," which revealed two smashed cars along with Bruner and four other Notre Dame students sprawled about and covered with fake blood. Meanwhile, police led away the intoxicated "driver" of the car which had hit Bruner's vehicle.

For the remainder of the school day, Bruner and 15 other Notre Dame students — four from each class — frequented the halls and classrooms in silence, dressed in black.

Bruner acknowledged that the skit has already had a profound influence on at least one Notre Dame student.

"This person I know in the senior class said, 'I've been drinking and driving, but I'll never do it again after what I saw,'" Bruner said. "If we can influence one person, that can lead on to others."

Bruner has immersed herself in similar projects at the school, such as Students Against Drunk Driving (SADD), and Teens Encouraging Alcohol/Drug-Free Messages in School (TEAMS). She also represented Notre Dame at a Student



Bruner's anti-drinking and driving concerns are reinforced through various displays in her school's hallway.



Provided photo

One of Bruner's fellow students is shown during a staged DWI accident.

Leaders Against Drug Abuse workshop in Ithaca last summer.

Bruner, a parishioner at St. Mary Church in Elmira, said the death of a family member's friend in a drunk-driving related accident six years ago influenced her to become aligned with SADD and TEAMS.

Along with her anti-alcohol efforts at Notre Dame, Bruner has served as Student Council president and has been a member of the Chemung County Youth Council, Key Club, National Honor Society and Christmas Basket Club.

David Bernatavitz, a Notre Dame social-studies teacher who oversees many of ND's anti-

drug and alcohol activities, has been pleasantly surprised by Bruner's devotion to this cause.

"It's amazing, the people who come forward," said Bernatavitz. "She's been so busy, but she comes to me and says, 'Can I be involved in (SADD'S) Prom Promise program.'"

Bernatavitz added that more than 95 percent of the ND students attending this year's proms pledged to abstain from alcohol on those nights by signing the Prom Promise.

Bruner, ranked 19th in her class, will attend Georgetown University this fall on an academic scholarship. She plans on continuing her athletic career by playing soccer for the Hoyas' NCAA Division I program.

Bruner also hopes to maintain her stance against alcohol by joining a campus organization similar to SADD.

"I think that there's a need to have it anywhere. You're taught this in high school, but there's even more of a need for it in college," she commented.

Asked how she would respond if a fellow college student offered her alcohol, Bruner remarked, "I don't see myself going to college and changing my views to please people."

## U.S. reflects split feelings regarding graduation prayer

By Patricia Zapor  
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — When Jennifer Green graduates from high school June 10, she wants to thank God for helping her during her years at Mandarin High School.

At the Jacksonville, Fla., public school, someone from Green's class will take two minutes during the graduation program to say a few words — probably of prayer — that have not been reviewed by administrators. That will satisfy Green's desire for a prayer, and a federal district court says it would be constitutional.

"To me, prayer is a sacred honor," she said. "Besides it's been a tradition here as long as I can remember."

Two years after the Supreme Court ruled that public school employees may not be involved in arranging for prayer at graduations, around the country lower courts, administrators and students are still sorting out what, if any, religious comment might be constitutional in commencement exercises.

Green's Duval County School District at least for the moment has prevailed in permitting graduating seniors to use two minutes during the ceremony for uncensored speech approved by the class. The U.S. District Court in Jacksonville ruled May 5 that the school district's two-minute message policy is constitutional. The American Civil Liberties Union, representing students opposed to any prayer in schools, was appealing the decision.

Meanwhile, students in New Jersey have been prohibited from including student-led prayers in their graduation ceremonies at the order of the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. In Virginia, a U.S. District Court also said a policy permitting student-led prayers was unconstitutional.

But in Idaho, a federal judge followed the lead of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Texas a year earlier and said non-proselytizing and nonsectarian graduation prayer approved by students is permissible.

Since the Supreme Court's 1992 *Lee vs. Weisman* opinion prohibited school authorities from even arranging for a speaker to present a prayer, lower courts have stitched together a patchwork of rulings about whether students may bring prayer into their own ceremonies.

The result is some schools permit graduating seniors to include prayer while others forbid it. A handful of states, mostly in the South, have passed laws permitting religious speech at student-planned events.

Legal challenges from both sides of the debate abound, yet the Supreme Court so far has declined to expand on *Lee vs. Weisman*. Without comment last year the justices let stand an appeal of the 5th Circuit ruling that permits student-led prayer.

One of 11 Mandarin High students pressing for the right to their two minutes to pray in Florida's *Adler vs. Duval County School Board* case, Green is adamant about retaining the tradition of prayer at graduation.

"I'm not saying I want to get up and tell everyone to change their lives, but for me, not to be able to proclaim my beliefs would be an injustice," she said.

An active member of the First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Green said she jumped at the chance to join the case that last year had the entire senior class choosing up sides in the prayer/no prayer debate. This year, there's been less in-school discussion, but the seniors have already taken a vote. The majority of the class supports using their two minutes for a prayer, she said.

The attorney representing the students as they side with the school district thinks the Duval district constructed a clear, constitutional way for students to include prayer if they want to.

Mathew Staver, president of Liberty Counsel, a civil liberties legal organization, said many attempts to permit students to include prayers have been poorly worded from a legal standpoint.

The school district memorandum at issue in *Adler* is different because it puts all the decisions in the hands of the students, he said.

"It allows them to choose to have or not have two minutes," Staver explained. "It doesn't mention prayer and the school can't censor what the students say."

"The more you put into the student arena, the better the constitutional footing," he said.

With Staver on that point, though they don't agree on much, is Steven K. Green, legal director for Americans United for Separation of Church and State, which opposes attempts to permit what it calls "corporate" prayer at public school ceremonies.

Green said although the school district's standards in the *Adler* case are "not as offensive" as other attempts to permit student-led prayer, it still goes too far. Letting students choose

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