

accident survivor gets MADD

Victim cautions drinkers

By Olivier Uyttebroeck
Staff Writer

Doctors assumed Rusty Combes would never be able to walk or talk following an alcohol-related accident in 1981 that hurled him against a brick wall, damaged the left side of his brain and put him in a coma for 53 days.

Today, Combes lives in Dallas' Highland Park area, staying in the home he purchased with part of the \$1 million he received in a legal settlement after the accident. In his business card, Combes identifies himself as a spokesman for the Texas Fraternity Against Drunk Drivers — a group very different from the one Combes had envisioned for himself prior to his accident, which occurred in 1981 when he was a finance major at the University of Texas. But it would be hard to imagine a more effective spokesman against drunken driving. Combes is spending this week speaking and talking around the A&M campus, speaking with one who will listen but targeting fraternity groups in particular.

Combes began regaining his voice two years ago and is now determined to use it to prevent the same type of accident that befell him five years ago from happening to someone else. Far from being an impediment, his slow and halting speech has become an impact no actor or politician could hope to match. Damage to the left side of Combes' brain has rendered the right

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— Rusty Combes, commenting on his accident

half of his body all but useless. He can walk now, be it slowly and with great effort, with the help of an ornamental cane.

But in spite of the frailty of his body and voice, there is an unmistakable strength in his words. People look comfortable in Combes' presence — not only with Combes himself, but with one another. As he talks and jokes with the people around him, it's clear that he has a skill for galvanizing a group of strangers into a purposeful body.

"I'm a very determined, hard-working young man," Combes says. "It's a lot of hard effort — very hard today still — but it's no big deal. I just love challenges."

Combes' accident happened during a big spring celebration, "Old South," his fraternity holds every year in Austin. For this reason, Kappa Alpha bore much of the \$21 million settlement Combes received in compensation for the accident. But remarkably, there is no bad blood between Combes and his fraternity, he says.

"It's something that could have

happened anytime to anybody," Combes says, implying that for a group of men to pile into the back of a pick-up truck after a night of heavy drinking is not exclusively fraternity behavior.

In Combes' words, "dangerous horseplay" was going on in the cab of the truck that carried himself and several of his fraternity brothers away after the "Old South" celebration.

The driver had been unable to reach the brake pedal and the truck sped through an intersection, down a hill and collided with a brick wall at 40 mph. Combes, the only person injured seriously in the crash, was hurled out the back of the truck.

According to a November 1985 article in Newsweek, the fraternity provided 40 percent of the \$21 million compensation, the driver paid \$10,000 of the settlement and another fraternity member, who was on the floor jerking the accelerator up and down, was liable for the rest. In the end, insurance companies covered nearly the whole settlement.

And Combes was still able to purchase his Highland Park home, even after his lawyers collected their \$2 million share from the settlement. On the other hand, he lost the girlfriend he had gone out with for five years prior to the accident.

"I think I've hit the nail on the head," says Combes in regard to the new career he is contemplating, as a spokesman for MADD.

Senate budget negotiators offer to increase total spending cuts

AUSTIN (AP) — Senate budget negotiators made the House a compromise offer Tuesday that would increase total Senate spending cuts by \$153 million.

"We think the Senate stands ready to split the difference," said Sen. James D. Abilene, chief Senate negotiator. He noted that compromise efforts were about \$326 million when the first special session ended unsuccessfully.

"This is our effort to reach a mid-ground," Jones told a meeting of an appropriations conference committee that served in the first special session on the state budget deficit.

Rep. Jim Rudd, D-Brownfield, chief House negotiator, said, "We're

trying to put a plan together. We've just got some basic ideas with no bottom line yet."

The meeting of the Senate and House negotiators was unofficial because the House has not acted on its appropriations bill, which makes \$739 million in spending cuts from the 1987 budget. The bill will be presented to the entire House Wednesday, and a House conference committee cannot be appointed until the House acts on the bill.

The Senate approved a bill Monday that would reduce spending by \$413 million.

Jones said the Senate's compromise plan would cut another \$5 mil-

lion from the governor's office utility contingency fund; \$20 million from special fund balances except those for insurance regulation, crime victims and fish and wildlife; \$23 million savings in the Mental Health and Mental Retardation department brought on by new revenue sources; \$24.6 million from the state highway department's voluntary savings in 1986; \$4 million from personnel losses; \$10 million from the College Coordinating Board in reduction of the tuition shortfall; \$13.4 million from junior college funds; \$20 million increased collections at state medical schools and an additional \$33 million cut in state funds for higher education.

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