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Underage Drinking in Princeton

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This Wednesday, one day before the Princeton High School Prom, students will get a close look at what can happen in a fatal DWI accident. Police, emergency services, and a funeral home will stage a dramatic reenactment of a DWI crash right on Walnut Street, between

the Middle and High Schools.

After the reenactment the students go into the gym with representatives from the sponsoring groups to debrief and comment on what they saw. "The students' comments are often powerful, from their observing the accident scene and seeing how many people get involved to save a life," said Princeton High School Substance Awareness Coordinator Gwen Kimsal, "and the amount of coordination to provide care when people arrive at the scene."

While underage drinking has always been a problem, it has recently become an issue of greater concern to members of the Princeton community. Last fall the Princeton High School PTO cancelled the Homecoming Dance, changing the event to a bonfire and a movie, prompted by the behavior of certain students that was in some cases fueled by alcohol.

This Fall, Princeton University freshmen will be prohibited from "rushing" fraternities and sororities, partly in an attempt to curb the excessive drinking that goes with the ritual.

Earlier this month, Corner House sponsored a meeting on underage drinking at the Princeton town hall. Corner House is a counseling center for

adolescents, young adults and their families and is an organization that has led the way to address substance abuse and family crisis issues.

The meeting opened with a video on underage drinking from National Council on Alcohol and Drug Dependence (NCADD). According to the video, statistics demonstrate that adolescents who drink before the age of 15 have a 40% chance of developing alcoholism, but if they wait until 21, the rate drops dramatically. When it comes to underage drinking, people “don’t look at the larger picture and see the alcoholic dependency that can develop.”

Penalties for underage drinking are severe. Prosecutor Chris Koutsouris described what happens legally to individuals who have been arrested for underage consumption or possession of alcohol. “While people are charged with a disorderly person’s offense or misdemeanor, it is still part of our criminal code. You’re looking at up to \$1,000 in fines and six months in jail. Six months in the Mercer County workhouse is not a fun place to be.”

“In addition you can spend the next two years reporting monthly or greater to a probation officer, as well as cleaning up or performing some other community service on the weekend at a place you don’t want to be. And if your license is suspended, you’ll have to figure out how to walk to your parole officer or community service. And it will go on your record, showing up on a background check when you go to college or law school or apply for any licenses such as nursing.” Even possessing a bottle of alcohol as a minor is considered a crime that can send someone to jail.

Koutsouris also talked about the criminal liability of adults who serve alcohol to minors or are indirectly responsible for alcohol consumption by minors on their premises. “Hosting a party where you knowingly serve alcohol or entice minors to consume alcohol, you might face criminal liability that can send you to jail for six months with a five thousand dollar fine. Making your home available where minors consume alcohol also makes you guilty of that statute, even if you are away and unaware of the party going on.”

If an injury results from alcohol consumption at a house party, Koutsouris continued, the host or homeowner can be charged with a more serious crime of endangering the welfare of a child. “I don’t even get to see that case. It goes to the County Superior Court, a crime punishable by five years in the state prison and \$15,000 in fines.” Homeowners who are sued in such situations stand to lose their home and savings.

While the penalties for underage drinking in New Jersey are significant, in

2009 Governor John Corzine signed into law the Lifeline legislation, created to encourage young people to call for help if a friend who has been drinking appears to require medical attention.

According to Candice Singer, research policy analyst for NCADD, a Medical Amnesty Policy survey of 61 schools sponsored by the University of Virginia showed that such policies led to a 50% increase in identifying a student with an alcohol problem, a 50% increase in follow-up counseling of the student, and a 50% increase in cases where an EMT would be called if a student was overdosing on alcohol.

Princeton High School student Ashley VanName said she didn't hear stories of students drinking until her sophomore year. When she started working at Corner House in her junior year, "it hit me that drinking is a really big issue. What I mean is that all my friends were drinking every weekend." VanName said that she found it intimidating but was glad she stuck to what Corner House had taught her.

"You don't need to drink to have a good time, it's really true. Prom is coming up for juniors and seniors, and all you hear about are the parties and going to the shore, but I think without drinking, people would be safer and have a much better time," said VanName, who this year is President of the Corner House Student Board.

Glen, a PDS student, said that in junior and senior year, there was a core group of twenty-five kids who drank every weekend, and there was a lot of peer pressure to fit in with the cool and popular kids, but that "it is possible to go through high school and not drink. At the end of the day, I think it's about staying true to yourself, and that's how I think about it in high school."

Kimsal, who has worked as a Substance Awareness Coordinator at PHS for twenty years, said that students who come to her voluntarily are covered by the Federal confidentiality law.

Kimsal says "[Students] are drinking to get drunk. They are pre-gaming, which means they are drinking before events, a lot of alcohol in a short amount of time. And they are creative in the ways they get drunk, such as drinking downstairs when the parents are upstairs. Younger students in ninth and tenth grades are getting their liquor from their parents' liquor cabinet, and older students are more likely to get alcohol from older siblings and people in the community."

Kimsal also said that the earlier someone starts drinking, the greater the

problem. “It’s not uncommon for an eighth grader who starts drinking to have an alcohol dependency problem by tenth grade. Their generation is a stressful generation, their world is different than our world, and you can’t compare it to your own generation. They tend to drink hard liquor because it is easier to hide.”

Underage drinkers would do well to take heed of the long-term consequences of excessive drinking to their health. A social worker who often sees clients at the other end of the spectrum, twenty to thirty years later, said “It’s very tragic. We’re talking about years of poor nutrition and disease, alcoholics look older than they are, and that’s not just poor people, it’s people who were formerly middle class. I see all the terrible societal ramifications of drinking over the years.”

About the Author »



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Bonnie Schultz has worked as a technology and marketing writer in the Boston area. She moved here in 1997 and is the mother of two boys. Since 2007, Bonnie has been blogging about food and community happenings in the Princeton area.

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