

The Martha's Vineyard Times

Op-Ed : Drinking, drugs, teens, and parents - in it together

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Each new school year begins with high expectations that Vineyard students will achieve greatness in both academic and extracurricular activities. We follow our children's accomplishments on local television, through the newspapers and in person. At the same time we live in fear that another fatal accident, another Island home involved with dealing drugs, or another young adult arrested for purchasing liquor for underage drinkers, will capture the front-page headlines.

One of the great aspects of the Island is that almost everybody knows everyone else or, if not, knows someone who knows that someone. Unfortunately, that also often means that we have far too much information (some of it true, some of it not true) about other people's lives and actions. Nagging questions then arise: How do I deal with the fact that I know someone who is buying alcohol for an underage drinker? How can I get the police to believe me when I tell them a drug dealer lives next door? How do I confront the parent of my child's friend who believes that it is okay for the kids to drink in their house as long as the kids are not driving?

Do I keep silent and pray that nothing bad will happen, that the problem will just go away? Do I want to risk the wrath of my neighbor, my friend, my child's classmates, and my own child by speaking out? For far too long, the community of Martha's Vineyard has struggled with personal, professional, and criminal consequences of not facing facts about teen alcohol use on Martha's Vineyard. Alcohol use starts slowly in middle school years and increases exponentially through the high school years. Most of the drinking occurs on Friday and Saturday nights, in private homes, on beaches, and in cars.

Most kids have their "packies," the 21- to 23-year-old who buys for them because someone bought for him or her when they were that age. Seventy-two percent of all M.V. high school seniors report having consumed alcohol in the past 30 days. More than 50 percent of all sophomores, juniors, and seniors report recent alcohol use. These statistics are far above state and national averages. We have a problem and, as adults, we have to become part of the solution.

As co-chairmen of the Dukes County Health Council Youth Task Force (YTF) we challenge each member of the community to step up and support one of the following initiatives. We ask that you do this in all of your community roles as parents, government leaders, church members, sports fans, friends, coaches, etc.

Minor in possession laws. The YTF asks that all police departments begin to look at uniform enforcement of underage drinking. Community members can help by contacting police to report underage drinking parties, or to report adults who knowingly provide alcohol to minors. If you are the parent of minor who has been caught with alcohol, support the police officers' actions.

Sale of alcohol to those under 21. Our local package stores are diligent in identifying underage drinkers who are trying to buy alcohol. We applaud their efforts. What is harder to control is the number of young people in their early 20s who buy for underage drinkers. The YTF's Sticker Shock campaign works to address this issue by placing stickers on bags and beer packs that warn of the legal consequences of providing alcohol to underage drinkers. Not all package stores participate in this program, and we ask that you patronize stores where the stickers are prominently displayed because it is a clear indication that the liquor store is working closely with us.

Responsible beverage server training. Support our upcoming initiative to make it mandatory that all wait staff that work in an establishment that sells liquor participate in a responsible beverage server training before working in that establishment. Many liquor establishments insist on this training, but not all. The YTF will be asking that the boards of selectmen support a mandatory responsible beverage server training by law. This ordinance would apply to catering services as well as restaurants.

Social host laws. It is illegal for any adult to provide liquor to anyone under 21 who is not their son or daughter. We need to keep adults legally accountable for providing alcohol to teens. The YTF will be hosting social host liability law informational nights in the coming year, as well as asking towns to adopt an ordinance outlining civil and criminal penalties for violations of social host laws.

Safe homes pledge. Every parent of students in grades 7-12 has received a safe homes pledge in the mail. In signing the safe homes pledge and returning it to the YTF, parents are agreeing to not serve alcohol or drugs to minors at gatherings in their home. In addition, they are making a commitment to provide active chaperoning of activities in their home, alert other parents if a child appears to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs, and welcome conversations with parents or guardians if a child is going to visit their home to assure that the proper supervision is in place.

Tips hot line. The YTF is exploring the feasibility of establishing a police hot line that would allow community members to anonymously report underage drinking parties or

illicit drug activities.

For parents, it is far easier to over talk an issue or to avoid it than it is to confront and impose consequences to behaviors that can lead to death. As difficult as it may be, we ask that if someone suggests that your child may be using alcohol or other drugs, listen to that person and do not dismiss them with, "No, not my kid. Other kids are doing it, but not my kid." Seek the truth. We challenge parents and community members to step up and speak out. In recent years the role of parents has become blurred and overshadowed by the need to be a friend to your child. In the case of underage drinking, the parent hat is the only one that can be worn. Do not participate in any illegal activity that puts you or your child at risk. Losing your child, your home, or serving jail time is not worth a few minutes of an alcoholic high you might provide to an underage drinker. u

The writers are co-chairmen of the Dukes County Health Council Youth Task Force. The Youth Task Force website, www.mvyouthtaskforce.org, is under construction. Contact the task force by email at ytf.theresa@yahoo.com, or by phone to 508-696-5304. Or visit www.theantidrug.com or www.thecoolspot.gov for parenting tips.

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