

VINEYARD GAZETTE

Current Edition: Friday, June 19, 2009

Youth and Alcohol: Hard Questions, Few Answers

By MEGAN DOOLEY

In the face of unspeakable tragedy — an accident that left one Island teen dead and another seriously injured and charged with criminal responsibility — it seems an easy and obvious place to begin to lay blame: on the bottle. According to surveys taken by the Martha's Vineyard Youth Task Force, the percentage of high school-age Islanders who drink alcohol is higher than both state and national averages.

The youth task force is dedicated to reducing underage drinking through education and awareness about the dangers of early alcohol abuse. And coordinator Theresa Manning believes the underage drinking problem can be tracked directly to the Island's status as a summer resort. People on vacation drink. And in winter, high unemployment rates correspond to high rates of alcohol abuse in the adult population. Inevitably, these problems with alcohol trickle down to the kids.

“The whole entire environment that these kids are being raised in is conducive to alcohol abuse,” she said.

And while it may be easy to pinpoint the problem, solutions are far harder to come by.

Teenagers insist that underage drinking will continue. It is considered a rite of passage, a cure to the boredom that accompanies an isolated Island winter, a celebration of the energy that accompanies a festive, crowded Island summer. Either way, parties prevail.

Parents are caught between the desire to stop the illegal practice and keep their children safe. Some say it is necessary to acknowledge, without condoning, the likelihood that their children will drink before they turn 21. And they feel the most important goal should be to prevent their teens from mixing drinking with driving.

“I think kids are going to do what they are going to do, and we should just help them be safe,” said Marie Larsen, mother of an 18-year-old regional high school graduate. In her experience, she said, she has seen her son's group of friends respond responsibly in situations involving drinking, always making sure to secure a safe ride home.

Other parents believe the only way to ensure the safety of their children is to make sure that drinking takes place under their supervision. By monitoring the drinking and making sure that teens aren't driving under the influence, they feel they are

creating a safe environment for kids to engage in something they would be doing anyway.

“We have talked to parents who say they would rather have the kids home and drinking in a place where they are not going to be out on the roads drinking and partying and risking injury. That’s a challenge . . . of understanding the parent and the friend role,” said Mrs. Manning.

And some parents flatly take a zero-tolerance approach to underage drinking.

“It’s illegal,” said one such parent.

One 19-year-old former regional high school student who did not want to be identified described the Island party scene for teens. He said because the Island is a rural place where nearly everyone is known and there are few teen hangouts, parties happen only occasionally. And when they do happen they typically involve large numbers of kids, drinking heavily as if to make up for lost time, the former student said. The result, he said, is that kids end up more intoxicated. And because party guests come from disparate locations around the Island, finding a sober ride home is often a challenge.

Safe Rides, a youth-run service that provides high school students with rides home from unsafe situations, no questions asked, is not always an option, the former student said. High school parties can have dozens of teens in need of rides, and on many evenings, there are only one or two Safe Rides cars operating. This can make the wait several hours long. Though the service is good in theory, it simply does not have the resources to help every teenager in need, he said.

Designated drivers are another choice, but there is disagreement over the definition of the term. In a discussion with the 19-year-old former student and his father, the teenager argued that many of his friends were perfectly capable of operating a vehicle if they had consumed a few drinks. The father vigorously disagreed. “A designated driver is just that. A person who doesn’t drink. Period,” he said.

The father continued: “Parents have to start taking more responsibility. Stop blaming it on other people. We have to start blaming it on ourselves.”

Another 18-year-old regional high school graduate who spoke on condition of anonymity said he thinks teens do not receive enough credit for responsible behavior. “For the most part, kids are very mature and they are making the right decisions, but they [still] get treated like kids. I just think we’re not really that crazy at all,” he said, adding that alcohol-related accidents “become the face of teen drinking on the Island, [when] really it’s so different.”

The teen said he and his friends do secure designated drivers whenever possible. But he believes that most dangerous behavior stems from drinking hard alcohol. “Maybe it’s a myth,” he said, “[but] beer will not really get you drunk enough to hurt yourself.”

Edgartown police chief Paul Condlin knows the myths. “I think a lot of kids have that feeling . . . that ‘it won’t happen to me.’ I think it’s common for kids to take that

view,” the chief said.

“There are kids who definitely do drink and drive,” said another 18-year-old regional high school graduate. “There are some who will wait a few hours to go home [after drinking]. Then there are kids who will finish off a 750 [milliliter bottle of hard alcohol] and will get behind the wheel.”

While the teen definitely sees underage drinking as a problem on the Island, she does not believe it can be prevented. But she believes that safety services have helped to cut the odds. “Safe Rides is definitely a really well used thing. There is a misperception that it promotes teenage drinking. [But it] has definitely taken many people who shouldn’t be driving off the road, and gotten them home safely,” the teen said.

Bill Jones, co-chairman of the youth task force and a former guidance counselor at the Oak Bluffs School, acknowledged the hard realities. “We don’t want kids out there drinking, but we’re not naïve to think that we’re going to stop every kid. So we know we have to eliminate some of the sources and we have to educate parents and other adults,” he said, adding that communication is the key to tackling difficult issues.

“Talk early, talk often is what we’re saying to people,” he said.

Reader Feedback



Friday, June 19, 2009 10:56am

Young people who think drinking beer is not like drinking hard alcohol is like the alcoholic who only drinks beer so he is not an alcoholic. Alcohol has ruined far to many lives on the Vineyard. People fail to realize how far down their guard is when they are under the influence. Some mistakes made under the influence can make your life impossible to ever get back and extremely hard to start a new on.

Everyone, no matter your age, before you take that first sip, think is losing life as I know it really worth it.

- BARBARA , TISBURY

Friday, June 19, 2009 1:19pm

It takes experience to know how your body reacts to alcohol and how much is too much: prohibition has never worked for citizens of any age. It's up to parents and other responsible adults to decide whether that experience is gained in a safe home environment. Waiting till you're 21 only delays the experimenting, without preventing it. Surely you're familiar with the '21 shots on your 21st birthday' rite of passage? Google it.

Also, underage drinking is perfectly legal with parental consent. See

<http://web.mit.edu/alcohol/www/laws.html#mass2a>

Barbara from Tisbury makes a good point. Drinking is dangerous for anyone who can't handle it--regardless of age.

- Maia Smith , Aquinnah

Friday, June 19, 2009 4:24pm

As a parent, I'm aware of the dangers that come along with even the slightest amount of rationalization.... I've heard, "oh, I won't get pulled over" and "oh, there's nothing wrong with having a couple drinks and driving", and this sort of slight rationalization is exactly what leads to the horrors that unfolded last week on the Vineyard.

Furthermore, I've heard, "oh, it was just an accident, he's a good guy, really..." referring to the driver in a similar accident last summer off-Island where a young man was killed due to drunk driving. Now the "good guy" is presently condoning and rationalizing drinking and driving with a two year-old child here on the Vineyard, only two days after last week's accident. When will people wake up?

I think that being a parent, I feel so terrible for the loss of life that occurred recently, only 3 miles from my own home; it changed my life. Sure, I've been out to dinner and had a glass of wine and gone home with my family in the car. But I won't anymore. Last week's events broke my heart in ways that I can't describe.

The serious loss due to slight rationalization - call it complacency if you will - of the neglectful and irresponsible thoughts that proceed acts of people that in turn endanger others, or worse, creates too much risk for me to condone drinking and driving in my family, even in the slightest bit. I urge parents to use this latest event to start cracking down on their children's drinking and partying habits. Complacency with what's "cool", not asking questions, and trying to be a "cool" parent may be the worst thing you've ever, ever, ever done. It's hip to be square.

Ms. Smith, I think your comment – on top of it having horrible timing - is horribly wrong. Underage drinking is not "perfectly" legal with parental consent. Underage drinking is a troubling reality that our society as a whole faces and deals with through loss and grief caused by alcohol related deaths, every month of every year.

I think rationalizing drinking habits may be the furthest thing from people's minds right now. My heart goes out to the families in so much pain. My prayers are with all of you.

- In Deep Already and Outraged , Oak Bluffs

Saturday, June 20, 2009 10:16pm

this has nothing to do with the recent tragedy. i care very much about the families involved and would never wish to add to their pain.

this has to do with what i just read. and it's my opinion.

first of all,it has always amazed me when i hear that island youth are "bored" or have

nothing to do.(and so they choose to drink and do drugs)

i think they are lucky to grow up in a place where there aren't bars on their windows or the only view from their window is..concrete. or the crack house next door. or have to travel hours to the closest poluted, murky lake or strip of beach.

instead, they have beaches, parks, ice rink, skate board park, game room, movie theatres, basketball and tennis courts, football, baseball and track fields. they attend some of the best schools in the country where they have opportunity for sports, drama, art and field trips to europe.

they get cell phones when they're 10, lap tops when they're 12 and cars when they're 16. many have media rooms at home, pools, hot tubs. many don't work, come home to meals, clean laundry, have their cars, insurances and needs met by their parents.and so their life is so difficult here that they need to dull their senses and change their perception?

another thing that astounds me is that in this day and age anyone thinks that "beer will not really get you drunk". these children have been taught from kindergarten (D.A.R.E., youth task force) about the danger of drugs and alcohol. and the parents know it too. i'm just saying - is there a need for more education? and since when did it become ok to break the law?

i'm certainly not the perfect parent, but i'll be damned if i ever knowingly let one of my children when they were minors attend a part where alcohol was present. or where parents weren't home, or where i didn't know the parents or an all night party. i agree with the "father" quoted above. we have to stop blaming and take responsibility for our families.

- momof4 , tisbury