



CASA Sponsors Meeting on Underage Drinking

Written by Pat Grace Friday, 30 April 2010 00:00

A Sobering Fact: Drinking Before 14 Increases

Chances Fivefold of Becoming an Alcoholic

Toren Volkmann could easily have been anyone's teenager in Manhasset—motivated, bright, athletic, attractive, he had it all. But he partied too much and over the years it took its toll. He stood before the audience of about 70 parents and school administrators at the high school auditorium on April 15 as a recovered alcoholic, featured speaker and co-author, with his mother, of *From Binge to Blackout*.

At this Town Hall Meeting, “Teens Don’t Just Drink...They Drink to Excess,” Manhasset Coalition Against Substance Abuse (CASA) joined hundreds of community coalitions nationwide to alert parents to the risks of underage drinking and inform parents and the community how to take action to stop it. Cited often, for the sake of comparison, is the nation’s changed outlook on smoking. Now that smoking is a documented health risk individuals, of their own accord, have quit. It was said it is now known that between ages 12 and 23 the brain develops tremendously.

Lisbeth Shibley, executive director of Manhasset CASA, welcomed parents and residents and discussed the importance of working together to address this community health issue. Shibley stated, “Our hope is to unite the community through education and dialogue so we can begin to change what has become an all too common and accepted norm: over the top, underage and binge drinking, the consequences of which can be devastating.” Underage drinking is not a rite of passage, she said, studies now show it causes irreversible damage to the brain.

Manhasset CASA’s project director Cathy Samuels reviewed the results of the Bach Harrison Prevention Needs Assessment that indicated alcohol continues to be the drug of choice for Manhasset youth and use is above the national norm. The survey questioned around 50,000 students; binge drinking was defined as five (male) and four (female) or more drinks taken on three or more occasions within a two week period; and the overall survey showed 12 percent of sixth-graders participated in drinking. For further information regarding the results, go to the Manhasset CASA website at www.manhassetcasa.org.

School Superintendent Charlie Cardillo commended Manhasset CASA for its efforts to bring the community together for such an important public health discussion. “Underage drinking is a most important topic, yet it brings a great deal of discomfort in any discussion as people re-examine their own practices regarding drinking as an adult or parent.” Cardillo said in 2000 excessive drinking became an issue at proms and questions were raised as to whether or not to continue the dances. Around 70 years of the Senior Frolic was at a crossroads then—and drinking has only gotten worse, especially binge drinking.

It was noted repeatedly during the discussion that parents are a major influence regarding alcohol; their attitudes and behavior speak for them.

Toren Volkmann told parents, “Few students think about the problematic effects of continuous heavy drinking, then suddenly, the party ends and they find themselves a feverish, shaky, paranoid halfwit,

struggling to think, sleep, relax or eat.” He said he was involved in everything from the arts to sports and got good grades (Dean’s List in college) but once alcohol took hold of him there was no turning back. Some signs to watch for, he said, were getting arrested, being kicked off a team and blackouts. Volkmann said eventually he couldn’t socialize without alcohol and challenged the community to make a decision about their drinking styles, the alcohol culture, and the glamorized drinking scene. Toren hears parents exclaim, “At least it’s not drugs,” but said alcohol kills six times more youth than drugs. In speaking about his recovery, Toren explained, “ These days I don’t have the kind of regrets that I used to have. I don’t have hangovers, or endure withdrawals every weekend and I am no longer enslaved to drugs and alcohol.”

The dialogue underscored that parents want to be fun, be perceived as fun, but what would be helpful to their offspring would be to take a stand with other parents and provide a safe environment for them to socialize. Parents in the audience said it can be isolating to suggest alcohol free socializing—for both parent and child. Many kids, they said, won’t go to alcohol free high school parties. It was suggested they seek out like-minded parents and support each other.

Manhasset CASA’s local experts answered parent questions ranging from the legal and financial liability issues to parenting issues. When parents asked the panel “What can we do? Aren’t they safer in our house and besides they are only going to drink anyway?” Dr. Jeffrey Reynolds, executive director of LICADD, answered, “As a treatment professional and as a parent, I’m not willing to concede that our kids are ‘going to drink anyway.’ Underage drinking is illegal and given what we now know about brain chemistry, it places our kids at risk for developmental delays and future addiction. Because they get so many mixed messages elsewhere about alcohol, it’s up to us as parents to remain consistent and refuse to compromise about our kids’ health.”

Participating in the panel discussion was Nancy Morris, State Farm Insurance Agent/Owner in Manhasset; Oscar Michelen, Esq. “The Law Squad,” and Dr. Jeffrey Reynolds, executive director of the Long Island Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependency (LICADD).

Other helpful suggestions were made by the experts and by other parents struggling with the local drinking culture. Set forth a clear policy on drinking, with known consequences. Lock the liquor cabinet. Begin to educate children on the dangers of underage drinking while the child is still very young and when the child is older talk in a real way, not a judgmental way. Have a pre-established exit plan from a party for whatever reason, a simple call home saying “Code 3” would work. It’s a misconception that girls drink less than boys. Warn daughters of the consequences of date rape drugs mixed with alcohol and not to drink from a glass that has been out of sight. A useful website is <http://www.dontserveteens.gov>

Important information for parents hosting parties where underage drinking occurs is that Nassau County has a tough Social Host Law and it is being enforced—38 cases, it was said, are now in district court. Anyone over 18 years old is held responsible for allowing individuals under 21 to drink in their home or on their property. Insurance agent Nancy Morris cautioned that a teenager leaving your home under the influence who is then injured necessitates that you have liability lawsuit coverage. The insurance company may defend you but that insurance company may not choose to continue your insurance coverage. It is your job to know what is going on in your home, she said, adding that the kids need a place to drink, don’t let them use you, it is a dangerous situation.

In light of the survey results, CASA has embarked on a social marketing campaign “Parents Who Host Lose the Most: Don’t be a party to underage drinking. It’s against the law.” The campaign, developed by the Drug-Free Action Alliance, partners with members of the community in order to educate parents and residents to the health, safety and legal consequences of underage drinking.

Manhasset CASA, in collaboration with Manhasset Public Schools, Manhasset SCA, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Interagency Coordinating Committee on the Prevention of Underage Drinking, sponsored the Town Hall Meeting. For more information regarding underage drinking or if you would like to volunteer with Manhasset CASA, contact Cathy Samuels at (516) 267-7548.