

## Making alcohol 'uncool' key to educating teens

► Teachers, parents, specialists say portraying drinking as pathetic is key to prevention for students

LAST OF THREE PARTS

BY RICK FOSTER  
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**K**aren Nardone, a Medfield teacher and alcohol education specialist, remembers watching four female students casually sunning themselves rather than watching an accident demonstration meant to dramatize the hazards of drunken driving.

"I tapped one of them on the shoulder and asked why they weren't paying attention, and they all said, 'that won't happen to us.'" said Nardone, whose 36-year-old brother was critically injured by a drunken driver 14 years ago. For Nardone, the remarks were particularly telling.

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The girls didn't mean they wouldn't drink. They simply couldn't envision themselves or anyone they knew lying dead in a car wreck.

"That's the way it is with kids," Nardone said. "At that age, we all think of ourselves as invincible. It can't happen to us."

That kind of invisible shield may be one of the blessings of youth, but it represents a bitter challenge to educators, parents and organizations such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving that try to influence teens against risky behavior.

If that weren't enough, say experts, parents and teachers face stiff competition from teenage peer pressure and powerful liquor advertising that portrays alcohol consumption as sexy and desirable.

Adults reinforce image

Nardone sees teenagers constantly bombarded by messages from their peers and liquor companies urging them to accept alcohol as a part of everyday life. Even parents unwittingly contribute to the image.

"Just look at the way we refresh ourselves by pouring a cold one after mowing the lawn or rewarding ourselves with drinks at a special occasion," she said.

Barbara Harrington, a spokeswoman for the Bristol County Chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, noted that the parents of today's teenagers are baby boomers who quaffed their share during the 1970s, when the minimum drinking age was 18.

"Many of these kids are being raised by parents who are former underage drinkers and who sometimes feel uncomfortable setting high standards with their children," she said.

So what to do about teen drinking?

Although the recent trends have been dominated by attempts to scare teens with statistics and graphic demonstrations, many experts are laying increased emphasis on research and reliance on the home.

North Attleboro's public schools present students with all aspects of the alcohol issue through presentations on health and legal issues, an active student advocacy group and even a "Scared Sober" program that enables students to experience a mock drunk driving trial.

### Parents must lead

Still, Superintendent Richard Smith isn't confident students are getting everything they need to make the right decisions on drinking.

"Students are attentive to some degree in class, but there are some messages that are more effective when they're delivered at home," he said. "Clearly, parents have a more significant role in this issue."

Harrington agreed parents must take the lead, even if they weren't teetotalers in their youth. "Even if you've made mistakes, there's no reason not to set high standards for your child," Harrington said. "For us,

### Going on-line

**HOBART AND WILLIAM SMITH** Colleges site dealing with Professor Perkins and his work can be found at  
[http://campus.hws.edu/new/pss/200\\_depressurized.html](http://campus.hws.edu/new/pss/200_depressurized.html).

**MOTHERS AGAINST DRUNK DRIVING** can be found at  
[www.madd.org](http://www.madd.org).

that means no use before 21."

Beyond the obvious nostrums of education and strong, anti-drinking messages at home, recent research indicates a draught of truth may go a long way toward steering young people away from alcohol abuse. Colleges and high schools are increasingly adopting a scheme called "cultural norms marketing," which attempts to capitalize on teens' natural propensity to fit in.

Dr. Wesley Perkins, a sociology professor at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in New York, laid the foundation for the strategy during the 1980s when he began to question teenagers' "everybody does it" view of indulging in alcohol.

Perkins found that while teens were basing their behavior after what they thought their peers were doing, everybody wasn't "doing it" after all.

"There was a vast difference between what college students thought their classmates were doing, and what was actually happening," Perkins said.

Surveys showed that students grossly overestimated the amount and frequency with which their peers drank.

Perkins said the misperceptions stemmed from boisterous partying and binge drinking by a few, which was more easily remembered than normal behavior and thereby amplified in the minds of students.

Armed with that information, the colleges began peppering students with on-line factoids, posters and newsletter articles telling them essentially that drinking wasn't as "cool" as it was cracked up to be.

Since students wanted to "fit in," Perkins said, they changed their views about drinking, and alcohol consumption declined.

The result: Reports of problem drinking by students shrank 21 percent in two years. Campus vandalism, frequently fueled by alcohol, took an even bigger hit.

Other theorists question the reliability of student surveys and say they doubt all teenagers can be so easily swayed.

Perkins responded that when students at the colleges were asked whether they had lied on the survey, typically only one or two students per class raised their hands.

That only reinforced the impression among students that there was less boozing on campus than they thought.

Perkins said the approach is being used successfully on other campuses, and that an increasing number of high schools are adopting the strategy.

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