

# **Underage Drinking ...An Under-Recognized Problem**

To Connecticut Legislators (Re: HB5211 AAC Underage Drinking):

The numbers are alarming, yet they remain buried and under-discussed, not fully comprehended or acknowledged. Underage drinking and binge drinking are at epidemic proportions in Connecticut and in America, yet we continue to congregate in society's living room with little mention of the "elephant" that continually brushes against most of the furniture and also against us. How many more teenagers and young adults do we need to lose before we "see" and fully acknowledge the crisis? Having lost two sons in the last eight years to the problem, I believe I have earned the right to not only speak out on the issue, but to pound the table in the process.

We have 10.8 million children in America drinking alcohol illegally (7.4 million of them binge drinking), and we have yet to have our first congressional hearing on this massive, pervasive problem. The Center for Alcohol and Substance Abuse at Columbia University estimates 20% of alcohol consumed in America traces to underage drinkers, with an additional 30% to excessive adult consumption, which means roughly 50% of the industry's volume is problematic. It would be naïve to expect significant remedial efforts from the industry itself, beyond tokenism, without first being subjected to substantial and sustained pressure to do so. If we are going to rein in this problem, it will take a concerted effort from the public and private sectors working together, along with the willing cooperation of the media, to give the matter the airtime and frequency that it deserves.

We are a nation founded on change. It is our birthright, our heritage, and at times a moral imperative. History has taught us that silence in the face of a great moral wrong is complicity in that wrong, and I can no longer remain silent. Make no mistake. This is not a call to return to Prohibition, but it is a call to get a grip on the cloak of denial, to fix our collective eyes on the problem beneath long enough to begin to muster the will and the resources to affect needed change. The enemy here is not alcohol and drugs. It is inattentive and under-informed parents, educators and legislators.

Teenagers who learn a lot about the risks of drug use from their parents are 50% less likely to use drugs. However, only 3 out of 10 teens report learning a lot about drugs from their parents. Research indicates that kids who start drinking at age 18 have a two times normal risk of developing an alcohol problem later in life; at age 15 a four times normal risk, and at age 12 an eight times normal risk. (Note: The average age for first time drinkers in Fairfield County is 11.7 years, and teenage alcohol consumption in Connecticut is 20% above the national average). Compounding the problem, many misinformed parents continue to think it is smart to "teach" their teens how to drink responsibly at home, not aware or fully comprehending that any alcohol use by teens negatively affects their still developing brains, and that teens who drink are more likely to commit or be the victim of violence (including sexual assault) and to experience stress, depression, and suicidal thoughts.

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According to the 2004 National Survey on Drug Use and Health:

- 121 million Americans aged 12 or older were current drinkers of alcohol (10.8 million were aged 12 to 20). 55 million participated in binge drinking, defined as five or more drinks on at least one occasion in the past month (7.4 million were aged 12 to 20). 16.7 million were heavy drinkers, defined as binge drinking on 5 or more days in the past month (2.4 million were aged 12 to 20).
- In 2004, 4.4 million persons had used alcohol for the first time within the past 12 months, up from 3.9 million in 2002 and 4.1 million in 2003. Most (86.9 %) of the 4.4 million recent alcohol initiates were younger than age 21 at the time of initiation.
- Over 95% of the adults in this country who are alcohol-dependent started drinking before they were 21 years of age.

Getting a grip on this cloak of denial, and getting a grip on the job description of a parent and the duration of the assignment would be a good start. We need to change parental attitudes. Drinking by teenagers is not a rite of passage. It is a significant health risk that needs to be more fully understood and more knowledgeably controlled.

Our educators need to be persuaded to more fully integrate character development and life skills training into the core academic curriculum in our schools. According to the Institute for Prevention Research at Cornell, schools that implemented Dr. Gilbert Botvin's 30 session Life Skills Training curriculum in grades 6 through 8 were able to cut tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana use from 50% to 75%, with booster sessions in later grades raising the reduction to 87%.

At the same time, we need to inspire our Federal and State legislative branches by electing leaders of character who will support the cause of putting the welfare of our children first, after national security. Leaders who will surface the truth, who will gain consensus on the right thing to do, and who will consistently display the courage to do that right thing, every time, regardless of consequence, protestation, or hardship. Then and only then, will we begin to lay claim to being a Superpower, with the moral authority to lead others by our example and by our clarity of purpose.

David Pease, Wilton resident, founder of the Amistad 53 Mentoring Program and the Get a G.R.I.P. Foundation, Board Member of Connecticut Communities for Drug Free Youth Inc., Member of Lower Fairfield County Regional Action Council, father, author, prevention activist.

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