

Statement before the Joint Committee on Judiciary of the  
Connecticut General Assembly  
Testimony in support of HB 5211,  
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Speaking as a concerned parent and member of the West Hartford Substance Abuse Commission

*Inaction can be the source of as much damage as action.*

The word inaction characterizes the current approach by most adults to the growing use and abuse of alcohol. Most parents are terrified of the risks and potentially tragic consequences as their child attends high school and goes away to college. House parties in many communities are known by the young to be frequent and accessible. Enforcement of the underage drinking laws rarely results in consequences to those who provide the alcohol. Policy makers encounter difficulty in enacting effective statewide social host legislation.

In the midst of this inaction, the prevailing youth drinking culture grows and becomes more extreme. Regularly, families are hit with the devastating consequences of the prevailing culture when it's too late to act.

Our family experienced the terrible consequences of inaction. In a situation made possible by the acceptance of the prevailing alcohol culture on most college campuses, my daughter, Kristine, died in an alcohol related incident. This acceptance was not only by the students but also by the college administration that evidence shows gave far from adequate attention to underage drinking on campus and the reckless behavior that often is associated. Kristine had the misfortune to visit what can appropriately be characterized as a campus out of control.

Kristine was one of the over 1,400 college aged students who died in an alcohol related incident last year. She was the victim of the prevailing alcohol culture that develops through high school and then carries to college campuses. Although Kristine was a victim of the prevailing alcohol culture, she did not buy into it. Upon reviewing the circumstances, one can only conclude that Kristine's death was caused as much by the inaction of the policy makers and others responsible for student safety as by the reckless actions of those attending the party.

This is relevant to this Committee in that introduction to the drinking culture begins during the high school years, and even earlier. Easy access to alcohol at recurring house parties leads to greater expectations by many once they go away to college where any restrictions present at home are now nonexistent.

The aftermath of Kristine's accident has caused me to reflect continuously on the issue of underage drinking and what parents and kids are confronting. Following are ten points which reflects my observations and the experience of my three children:

1. Unfortunately, there will always be minors who seek to drink regularly regardless of the consequences. However, the majority of teens, possibly matching the 80/20 rule, do not approach the teenage years in this way. It's the prevalence of the drinking culture that leads the 80% who are not inclined to frequent exposure to alcohol use and abuse.
2. Potential arrest under the proposed statute will be an effective deterrent to the 80% of minors not predisposed to seek drinking opportunities. This will reduce the frequency of minors drinking on a regular basis.
3. Certain parents allow minors to drink in their house based on the belief that it is safer to have their own kids do their drinking at home. Surely the vast majority of parents whose children attend such house parties in other people's homes do not approve of their child's presence.
4. The extreme nature of drinking that is now frequent among youth more regularly occurs in residences. The drinking games that excessive drinking is often organized around are not as conducive in settings other than a private residence.
5. As a parent of a child who suffered the ultimate consequence of the prevailing drinking culture, I am much more concerned with identifying and punishing the adult enablers than in punishing minors, except in where the case minors are repeat offenders.
6. Minors who possess alcohol should be held accountable and encouraged to seek help where necessary. The prime purposes for the consequences should be more as a deterrent, than a weapon. As for adults, the full enforcement efforts and consequences must be borne on those who facilitate underage drinking.
7. While those drinking excessively are most at risk to suffer the negative consequences of their actions, those who choose not to drink are also at risk. This was the case with Kristine. Although she unintentionally found herself in the midst of scores of underage students drinking excessively, she had little, if anything to drink that night as evidenced by post-mortem test results.
8. We cannot rely upon the judgment of adults aware of underage drinking parties to control the excesses and risky behavior that often results. The college that Kristine had the misfortune to visit was not only aware of the drinking by minors both on and near campus, but also was aware and temporarily present while the reckless activity that eventually led to tragedy was occurring.
9. All adults need to get serious about the prevailing alcohol culture and not wait until tragedy causes them to act upon their concern.
10. Passage of HB 5211 is a first step in a long effort to curb and control the prevailing drinking culture among minors.

The General Assembly must act now to assist communities in their attempt to stop and to intervene in house parties. While over one-quarter of the municipalities have enacted house party ordinances, the nature of a municipal ordinance in contrast with a state criminal statute continues to handcuff the enforcement efforts of local police. HB 5211 is necessary for effective enforcement. This will lead to a change in attitudes since there will be genuine consequences to hosts of house parties and those minors in attendance.

Kristine's tragedy was the direct result of inaction by responsible individuals. "We all make mistakes" was the response by the college president to the accident and school policies that led to the accident, as recently reported in the local press. I hope after learning the circumstances of that evening, we can agree that the consequence of the college's mistake is too significant to allow further similar mistakes.

My wife and I urge you to support HB 5211 and submit the bill to the full General Assembly. More importantly, we urge passage by both houses during this session. An effective state social host statute is long overdue in Connecticut. With passage of HB 5211, inaction by this body will not be identified as the direct cause of future tragedies. We will never know which lives passage of this bill may save in the future. However, inaction will surely contribute to numerous additional unnecessary and avoidable tragedies. We cannot accept further mistakes.

# Does every parent's worst nightmare need to become reality?

By Stephen and Ellen Guest

*Op-Ed*

Although agonizing for prospective students, the college search can be equally troublesome for parents. Along with academic quality, cost, student services and location, safety is a prime concern and the subject of numerous parental inquiries. Significant concerns of most parents are campus culture and school policies related to alcohol.

Our three-children successfully located colleges that met their tastes and needs and satisfied our criteria, including safety. A factor not considered is the prevalent practice of college students to visit other campuses. Therefore, parents' concern should not only be their child's campus, but also unknown campuses where some direct or indirect connection may compel a visit.

Our family learned this lesson all too painfully on a Sunday morning in February. Local police arrived at our front door with the dreadful message that Kristine died in a snowmobile accident early that morning in upstate New York while visiting a friend. As much as despair, confusion quickly set in. How could this be our daughter who was attending Quinnipiac University in southern Connecticut? She had never been to upstate New York and was never close to a snowmobile. Unfortunately for us and especially Kristine, we subsequently learned how tragedy can result from obscure connections and unfortunate circumstances.

Our initial confusion ended as we contacted her friends. Kristine's roommate had planned to visit a male friend on his 20th birthday at a college in upstate New York. The arrangements included two other female students, another attending Quinnipiac and one attending Northeastern in Boston. The male friend, Kristine's roommate, and the two other friends all came from the same Pennsylvania town.

The roommate also invited Kristine, who struggled with the decision all week. Appealing to Kristine was the opportunity to visit friends attending Simmons College in Boston, where she spent her freshman year. After considering her current class-work load and other commitments, Kristine decided to go.

They started their journey Friday afternoon, spent the evening in Boston, where Kristine dined with her Simmons' friends, and left for New York on Saturday. The northeast was experiencing sparkling February weather with temperature above normal. The setting was right for the celebration planned by the Pennsylvania friends. Separate from the birthday celebration, the students at the New York college held their "customary" weekend party. The party was held around a bonfire on the lake contiguous to the campus and included riding snowmobiles on the ice.

This combination of risky activities is easily recognizable as a prelude to disaster. Snowmobile riding is dangerous in itself. New York law requires riders to wear helmets, which were largely absent. Riding on ice is especially risky since the lack of obstacles creates the tendency for greater speed and carelessness. Finally, night riding compounds the other risks.

Exacerbating these risks was heavy underage drinking by approximately 75 to 100 college students with anywhere from eight to 15 snowmobiles. All occurred within the view of the campus, where the sound of multiple snowmobiles surely was evident. After midnight, the college's

Director of Student Affairs and a safety officer visited the students at the bonfire with an apparent message to clean up and keep safe, but not to cease the obviously dangerous activities. They left without taking any action to stop the reckless activities.

Kristine, to her credit, appropriately considered the risk factors. While her traveling companions and host were riding throughout the night, she declined for over six hours. She unfortunately relented at approximately 4:30 a.m. when the group returned to the bonfire to view a spectacular sunrise. Her host borrowed a snowmobile from another student to give the girls rides. While the host was said to be highly intoxicated earlier that night, he now appeared sober to the snowmobile owner and the other girls. However, his blood alcohol content was still well above the legal limit.

Kristine was the last of her traveling companions to accept a ride. Her first ride was the last for her and the driver. Kristine's blood/alcohol level later proved negligible in that it was found to be too low to place a measurement. Therefore, Kristine found herself in an unanticipated situation and consciously avoided the riskiest activities. As an investigator described her actions, "Kristine was the least irresponsible of the group." Unfortunately, her resistance lasted only so long, and she paid the ultimate price.

Unfortunately, bad things happen and there is not necessarily fault elsewhere in lieu of personal responsibility or chance. A certain level of responsibility rests with Kristine. However, with a slight change in facts or, more significantly, appropriate actions by those in authority, Kristine would be with us today. Kristine's tragedy shows that regardless how well one recognizes and manages life's risks, circumstances can still result in a tragic end. Exacerbating the tragedy was the obvious bias of college personnel to not stop clearly reckless behavior.

Kristine's demise is a tragic example of an authority's failure to act, either through indifference, lack of judgment, or a desire not to spoil the party. To what extent do similar attitudes exist within the administrations of other colleges and universities? While personal responsibility and chance contributed to Kristine's end, those who failed to act bear the greatest responsibility.

These unfortunate and avoidable circumstances demonstrate how all colleges and universities must act more responsibly to protect students, recognizing complete oversight is not possible. These institutions willingly accept our youth as they first experience true independence. Society must hold such institutions accountable when that obligation is ignored. Just maybe, fewer parents will have the send-off to college tragically be their final good bye.

*Stephen and Ellen Guest are West Hartford residents, and Kristine was a 2002 graduate of Conard High School. Her brother, Nathan, maintains a memorial Web site in her honor. Visit [www.kristinequest.com](http://www.kristinequest.com)*