

SOUTH JERSEY[™] MAGAZINE

The Young and the Reckless

by **Samantha Maarten**

Teen drinking is now tween drinking in South Jersey—and much of it starts at home.

Last year, the alerts began popping up on local police department and school websites, and circulating via e-mail forwards among parents groups: Even the most innocent of treats, gummy bears, were now a means for alcohol consumption—when soaked in vodka for a boozy but kid-friendly snack.

For South Jersey parents, shocks like these seem to come one after another, as they deal with the issue of underage drinking at a time when they thought all they had to worry about was science fair projects and soccer tryouts. After all, alcohol is an issue for high school- and college-age kids—right?

In fact, kids in New Jersey, on average, start drinking at age 11, according to the state Department of Human Services. Medford resident Nicole Mancini, who has seventh- and fifth-graders at home, says things have definitely changed since she was young—and learning about what happens in the community has been an eye-opener. “I might have been a little sheltered,” she admits. “I grew up in this area, too. So I was really shocked—the young age kids that are involved in [alcohol use], it’s shocking.”

More than shocking—it’s brazen, according to Joe Conlin, a coordinator at Prevention Plus of Burlington County. He describes underage drinking as something of an open secret: “Kids that drink underage like to post on Facebook ... social networking has made drinking more popular.”

Pam Kravitz, a Moorestown mom, says underage alcohol use is a top-of-mind issue for her, especially given that her town has seen several alcohol-related deaths in recent years.

“They have these gigantic 16-year-old birthday parties in our town,” she says. “There’s a lot of stuff that happens at them.” She says that, while parents who throw the parties, often held at hotels, may not know that kids are bringing in alcohol,

they're not necessarily making vigilance a priority either. "There has been alcohol. On Facebook kids would post pictures, so you could see what happened afterward," she says.

Cravitz has a daughter in high school and a son in eighth grade, and she worries for both of them. "I see it every day in town: Everyone wants to host the parties at their house or have the party in their basement, and no kid wants you to monitor them all the time. So it's hard to strike that balance. The kids don't want you around, so they leave them alone a lot, and that's when bad things happen."

During graduation and prom season, those kinds of parties tend to accelerate in frequency, says Conlin.

"Some parents at local school districts rent houses for kids at the Shore and hire a security guard to ensure kids don't leave the house, and let them drink—those are stories that we hear," he adds. "They excuse themselves from actually witnessing it."

But even when they are present, parents are finding ways to justify their actions. "Some parents are trying to endear themselves to their children by hosting a party and not letting people leave," says Voorhees Police Captain Lou Bordi. "They collect the kids' keys at the door."

He says that the underage drinking problem "is ongoing. It's an issue that sometimes you don't ever get a grasp on." However, he adds that what he does know is it's not just a Voorhees issue—it's a South Jersey issue.

Parents out of control

Cravitz says she's hyper-vigilant in part because her husband lost a sister to alcoholism in her 40s. "She left a legacy: She left what not to do in her life." But not all parents share her concern. A 2011 survey by Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD) found that 41 percent of teens said their parents let them attend parties where alcohol is available, up from 36 percent in 2009.

For as long as there have been laws regulating underage drinking, it seems, there have been parents who figure, "Teens will find alcohol one way or another. If it's under my roof, at least I can control it, and make sure they're safe." South Jersey is no exception.

Despite laws designed to hold adults accountable, aggressive campaigns by local school districts, and proscriptive policies put in place by municipalities, there are "cool parents" in just about every town.

Conlin confirms that, far from monitoring kids' Facebook pages for signs of alcohol use, many parents he meets actually enable it. "There was one mom who thought it was OK for her 10-year-old to drink her Mike's Hard Lemonade. She got tired of

saying ‘no’ to him, so she let him sip it to see what it was like,” he says. “When we did role-playing, and she saw how much he knew about alcohol, about drinking, then she realized the damage she had done. Parents think, ‘Drinking at our house is better than going out drinking.’ They don’t understand the damage they’re doing.”

Parents may think keeping the action at home limits some dangers. But, Conlin argues, drinking at home “shows that it’s OK to consume alcohol, and so it’s kind of a learned behavior—and parents aren’t even aware that they’re teaching it to their kids.”

Maybe that’s more convenient, given that local authorities have stepped up their enforcement, arresting teens who host parties and holding parents accountable.

Naomi Hubbard, executive director of Camden County Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, says those initiatives seem to be working to some degree. “I think parents are hosting a little bit less because of the consequences, and because of parents’ education programming and information,” she says. Still, she admits, not all parents are receptive to her message—particularly in more affluent South Jersey municipalities like Haddonfield.

“For a long time, I think Haddonfield ignored the fact that they had a problem,” she says.

Haddonfield Commissioner of Public Safety Ed Borden has made curbing underage alcohol use a mission, and he can attest that it hasn’t always been a welcome one. He and the Haddonfield School District made waves (and triggered civil rights litigation) for crafting what’s become known as the borough’s 24/7 policy on alcohol and drug use. The policy provided for more severe repercussions for alcohol arrests, including potential discipline within the school system, such as barring students from athletic participation.

That has met plenty of resistance and indignation. Says Borden, “There are parents who seem to think that they have some role in helping their child transition into adulthood in terms of alcohol use, and that’s very troubling. They don’t seem to get that, No. 1, it’s illegal, and No. 2, that it has a big impact on the development of a teenage brain. It’s not just turning a blind eye; it’s definitely enabling teenage alcohol use.”

Under New Jersey’s Social Host Liability Law, adults can be held liable in civil lawsuits following an alcohol-related injury or death. There’s also a penalty in the state of up to \$1,000 and up to 180 days in prison for those convicted of serving booze to a minor.

But given that it's a criminal offense to make your home available for minors to consume alcohol—and that some parents do it anyway—some argue that stronger tactics are needed.

What those tactics could be, though, is another question. “I don't think the laws have much impact, other than the DWI laws,” Conlin argues. “The punishments probably aren't severe enough, but I don't know what more severe could be. A local ordinance and a fine for having underage drinking—I don't think that intimidates some parents.”

Kravitz' eighth-grade son Aaron agrees it seems like many parents don't care much about teen alcohol consumption. “There's people already in my grade who I think drink every weekend,” he says. “I think most of them do it secretly. But I think some parents know, but they don't really care that much. They tell everyone else their kids don't do that, but some parents do know their kids are drinking.

“Some parents, if the kids are getting good grades in school, they don't really care.”

Grave Danger

Before Conlin came to work at Prevention Plus, he was an Edgewater Park policeman and later the Lumberton police chief. He will never forget his first encounter with the dangers of underage drinking: finding an eighth-grade Edgewater Park girl drowned in a neighborhood swimming pool with a .08 blood-alcohol level. “Bad things happen: There are accidents, sexual assaults,” he says. Now, Conlin makes sharing these stories with children and parents his mission. And the biggest shock to him: that parents are still surprised.

The brain continues developing through a person's 20s, so alcohol use before age 15 can leave a lasting imprint, making an individual four times more likely to become alcohol dependent than a person who waits until age 20 to drink, according to a longitudinal survey published in the National Journal of Substance Abuse. Underage drinking also poses risks to the development of the liver, the brain and the endocrine system, according to the National Institutes of Health. Teen drinking has also been linked to suicides and

Emily Capella, superintendent of Lenape Regional High School District, has been trying to engage parents on the issue and invite them to become part of the solution.

In fall 2010, she says, “We were very concerned looking at the number of students in our school that were having drug and alcohol violations.”

So, they engaged students and community members to help create a campaign, dubbed Defy the Issue, to promote the idea of a drug- and alcohol-free lifestyle. They've run parents' events, encouraged students to organize their own clubs

around the topic, and are looking to develop a sort of speakers' bureau of individuals who have overcome drug and alcohol abuse.

"It creates that conversation between not only the school district and the parent, but also the student and the parent, which is really the most important thing," she says. "This has created a very needed dialogue in our community and among parents. The feedback I'm getting from more and more parents is that, 'This is something I've been worried about, but I didn't know how to go about addressing this issue.' They're saying they really appreciate the 'permission' we've given them to debate this with one another.

"Do I think we have every parent on board? Absolutely not. But I feel we're a lot further along than we were two years ago."

Evesham Police Department's public information officer, Sergeant Joseph Friel, says underage drinking tends to accelerate in the summertime, but he doesn't see it as a critical issue in the township. Still, when the department holds its Cops in Shops events about four times a year—placing undercover officers in liquor stores—there are always arrests: four in the most recent operation, and 12 during a single day last winter. "I have no doubt that if we sat there every day, every day we'd make arrests," he says.

Still, that's not possible—so parents need to step in. Conlin says building that awareness is a critical step to kids' safety—and to spreading the word that the sense of helplessness that breeds the it's-safer-under-my-roof mentality isn't the whole story. "Parents can do something: Don't keep a large amount of alcohol in the house. Know where your kids are. Look on their Facebook accounts and their friends' accounts," he says. And, most important of all, "Sit down and talk with your kids about it."

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