

Town Hall Meeting on Underage Drinking

By Cindy Genau

I spent time with my girlfriends for our annual girl's "Ya-Ya Sisterhood" reunion. We obviously shared stories about our children. What I discovered from my conversations with my friends is that they are having similar experiences with their children as I am with mine in Newark, Delaware. Alcohol is a common theme.

In Newark, they are exposed to the easy access of acquiring alcohol and consuming it. It seems many high school students consume alcohol regularly. They feel they are entitled to the freedoms of adulthood, which includes drinking alcohol as a rite of passage. My son struggles with this issue as he sees drinking of underage students as a common event. We know that alcohol arrests in the city of Newark increase every fall with the arrival of the freshmen students many of whom come to the University of Delaware from our local high schools.

So Who Cares? We all should because parents, teachers, and good friends should help youth make wise choices. One of those wise choices is helping to prevent underage and binge drinking. In observance of Alcohol Awareness month, the Building Bridges Coalition and Newark High School PTA will sponsor a town hall meeting to address the issues of underage drinking in our community at the school on April 2, 2008 at 7pm in the cafeteria.

It is not just a college age student problem. The problem is already rampant during the high school years. Many parents agree with teens and young adults that drinking is their right and their advice to them is only, if you drink, just don't get caught. In a recent survey of area high school students, many admitted getting illegal substances from their parents. In my opinion, these types of counseling and actions by parents send the wrong message to young adults. It also creates a moral and legal dilemma for them because the legal drinking age is not 18 but 21 years of age. It puts the entire decision on the shoulders of teens when it is parents who should be providing the guidelines. I agree the ultimate responsibility of a teen's actions is the teen, who will suffer the consequences if they make the wrong decision. But, these teens still need some guidelines and limits to bounce those decisions against. Parents need colleges to enforce the law and parents need to provide consequences at home if teens break the law. My friend, who is a nurse and parent educator at Christiana Care Hospital, explained to me that psychologists now agree that adolescence lasts well beyond the teenage years. I have read that the brain does not reach maturity until the age of 21. This concerns me because not only are our teens breaking the law, but also they are damaging their brains at an early age.

A curriculum on the brain and drug addiction published by the National Institute of Drug Abuse specifically states that alcohol can kill the brain's connectors or neurons and that some neurons cannot regenerate. Alcohol kills the neurons in the brain, which causes a decreased ability to learn. Some of the brain's neurons that assist with memory are more vulnerable to the damage caused by alcohol abuse over time. Alcohol changes the

structure of the brain at a time in our young adult's lives when they need their brain for critical learning and memory at the college level.

So Who Cares? I don't pretend to have the answers for how we change the culture and environment of Newark. I do know that Newark High School PTA and Building Bridges Coalition hold non-alcoholic events that open the school to students so they have a place to congregate, sing, dance, play games, eat and socialize on Friday nights throughout the school year. The event is called "Fifth Quarter." Some are held after the fourth quarter of a football game. But we need to do more. Teens need more events and places to go like the 5th quarter. We need to help our teens and young adults understand the need to delay the use of alcohol until they are more mature and reach the legal age of 21. I do know that we all need to get involved – parents, schools, community members, and students. We can begin to educate ourselves to the awareness that the problem exists in our community and that there are opportunities to help make a difference. So join us at the Town Hall meeting at Newark High School Cafeteria on Wednesday, April 2 at 7pm. Light refreshments will be served. Pre-registration is encouraged. For more information, contact Catherine Buckminster at clmbuck@comcast.net by March 26th. Only you can make a difference.