

From the Boston Globe

Pledges aim to stop youths from drinking

By Steven Rosenberg, Globe Staff | November 24, 2005

It's not just that she's under age, but the 17-year-old has signed a pledge not to bow to peer pressure. A senior and president of the student council at North Shore Technical High School in Middleton, she still remembers the sadness that enveloped her school after a classmate, Michael Heitz, was killed by a drunk driver in Manchester nearly two years ago. After Heitz's death, more than 300 of the school's students signed a pledge not to drive under the influence, or be in a car driven by someone under the influence. Next month, Michaud will be leading a new pledge drive.

"I will not get into a car driven by myself or anyone else who is under the influence," she said, reading the pledge card. The back of the card includes a dedication to Heitz. "I think that people are faced with decisions like that and we should do everything we can to prevent people from getting into a car while intoxicated," said Michaud.

Joseph Sabella, a School Committee member of the technical high school, wrote the original pledge two years ago. He said the pledges, along with the recent passage of Melanie's Law -- which toughens penalties for drunk drivers -- bring a new consciousness to an old problem. "I really think that making students aware of this growing problem makes them more responsible," said Sabella.

But it's not just students who are taking pledges to avoid alcohol these days. In Gloucester, Revere and Chelsea, parents armed with national reports that link underage drinking to brain damage, sexual promiscuity, date rape, and half of all of the car fatalities involving teenagers, are banding together to keep alcohol out their children's hands.

In addition, Essex District Attorney Jonathan Blodgett has spoken out since taking office in 2003 about the dangers -- and penalties -- of adults providing alcohol to minors. "The consequences can be severe and far reaching," said Blodgett, citing the "social host liability" law, which calls for civil and criminal penalties for adults who allow underage drinking in their homes. More than 20 social host liability law cases have been prosecuted in Essex County since 2000, said Blodgett's spokesman Steve O'Connell.

"What we're trying to do is change a cultural norm that turns a blind eye when minors drink," explains Carol Seamans, program director for Gloucester Mobilizing for Change on Alcohol. After a 2002 youth risk behavior study found that 47 percent of Gloucester's middle school students reported trying their first drink at age 12 or younger, and 75 percent of seventh-graders reported that they obtained alcohol from the homes of parents, the organization began to focus on preventing underage drinking in homes.

Angela Dion, who helped start the program, believes a lack of communication among parents contributes to putting children in danger. "What we hope is that it will break down the fear of calling each other. Everybody's so busy, nobody knows where their kids are going, and we [parents] don't know each other. My kids are making friends and I want to know who the parents are, and the children are," said Dion, who has two children in Gloucester schools.

Parental involvement, and talking about underage drinking and substance abuse, is a critical responsibility not all parents want to accept, said Jeanne Blake. Blake, of Gloucester, who is a faculty member on the Division on Addictions at Harvard Medical School, has spoken to thousands of teens about underage drinking. She produces DVDs, videos, and books that help kids, parents and caregivers talk about difficult issues, such as alcohol. Her film, "Alcohol: True Stories," narrated by actor Matt Damon, has been distributed to 300 schools in the state.

Her advice to parents? "It's listening, being available, putting down the [TV] clicker and the cellphone, and taking the time to show that you really care."

In Revere, 950 parents have also pledged not to allow underage drinking in their homes, and have also promised that they would not abuse alcohol. Also, as part of the pledge, they promised to spend time with their children and to discuss their concerns, talk about the consequences of alcohol, drug and tobacco use, and to learn the names of their children's friends. "It's a very important mechanism to keep communication open between younger people and their parents," said Kitty Bowman, director of Revere CARES (Community Awareness, Resources, and Education to Prevent Substance Abuse).

To date, no surveys have been done on the effect of the pledge in Revere, or in Chelsea, where 200 parents have also pledged not to allow underage drinking in their homes. Amy Harris, who directs the Chelsea Champion Youth Coalition, said teens play a key role in her organization's educational effort. The peer leaders appear at "home host parties," and speak to eight

to 10 adults, presenting statistics about underage drinking, and its effects on youth. At each session, adults are asked to sign the pledge.

Said Harris: "By having these parties at a grass-roots level, we're starting to get the word out from family to family, and people are starting to get the idea."

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NorthTalk

Do you think no-alcohol pledges from students and adults are an effective way to limit underage drinking? Do you have other suggestions to deal with the issue? Log on to www.boston.com/northtalk to register your response. Or send responses to globenorth@globe.com or Globe North, One Corporate Place, 55 Ferncroft Road, Danvers, MA 01923.

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