

**SUBSTANCE ABUSE
RESOURCES INSIDE**

- Information
- Services
- Support

SAY CONNECTS

A YEAR-LONG SERIES FOCUSING ON COMMUNICATING OUR PRIORITIES FOR CHILDREN



Students come up with alcohol-free post-prom ideas during a HYPE Program meeting before class at Oak Park and River Forest High School.

ALEXA ROGALS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Prom and parental permissiveness

How to fight against 'everybody drinks' arguments with your teens

By **CASSANDRA WEST**
Contributing Reporter

Prom night. Fancy clothes and limos. Dinner and dancing. An evening that could stretch into a weekend at "the lake house."

In recent years, one popular Oak Park and River Forest High School prom tradition is to spend the weekend in Indiana or Michigan at someone's vacation home or rental --where it's almost certain there will be alcohol.

Prom and alcohol go together almost like a corsage and boutonniere.

According to a widely quoted survey

by AAA, some 41 percent of teens admitted that it was "highly likely" that they or a friend would use drugs or alcohol on prom night. And approximately 53 percent who admitted to drinking during or after the prom said they consumed four or more alcoholic beverages.

Given those statistics, school districts all over the country and including OPRF now issue warnings and tips for students and parents on how to have "a safe prom."

Why parents? Because parents wittingly and unwittingly enable the drinking. This comes backed by young peo-

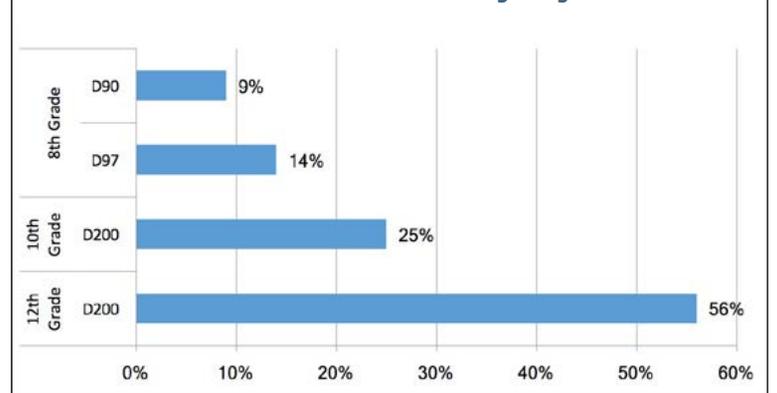
ple themselves.

Local youth have shared in interviews with those working to reduce underage drinking that they know parents who host underage drinking parties and parents who are willing to purchase alcohol for parties. Youth also have shared that a lot of parties are BYOB and parents know they are happening but choose to look the other way.

"Adults in the community are somewhat permissive," said Kelly O'Connor, prevention outreach coordinator for Oak Park Township, citing information gathered in interviews and through

See **PROM** on **page 2**

Alcohol Use in Past 30 Days by Grade



Data source: IYS

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Substance Abuse Resources

IMPACT

www.impactopr.org/programs/

Way Back In

www.thewaybackinn.org/

Network of Care

www.oakpark.il.networkofcare.org/mh/library/learning-center.aspx?lc=substanceabuse

OPRFHS: Healthy Youth Peer Educators (HYPE)

- Ginger Colamussi, Prevention Social Worker, GColamussi@oprfs.org, 708-434-3729

Alcohol Anonymous

312-346-1475

www.chicagoaa.org/find-a-meeting

- Young People AA

Grateful House

412 Wesley Ave

- Young at Heart Meeting (Age 16-

30) Suburban Fellowship Center

7438 Harrison St., Forest Park IL

Family Anonymous

708-476-2274

First United Church of Oak Park 848

W. Lake St.

Pillars

708-745-5277

www.pillarscommunity.org

Offers treatment for teens and adults who are diagnosed with substance use disorders.

Presence Health

708-410-0615

www.presencehealth.org

Services for adolescents and families begin with a comprehensive substance abuse assessment.

Rosecrance

815-391-1000

www.rosecrance.org

Adolescent substance abuse treatment facility

Gateway

877-505-4673

Treatment Center provides affordable and effective Inpatient Programs and Day Treatment Programs.

FACE IT

708-445-2727

www.oakparktownship.org

Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug Education, Prevention, and Early Intervention Program for Youth and Their Parents or Caregivers.

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PROM continued from page 1

the Illinois Youth Survey (IYS). Administered in schools biennially, IYS is a self-reported survey that gathers information about a variety of health and social indicators including substance use patterns and attitudes of youth throughout the state.

O'Connor said in the survey, "kids would say [there is] easy access to alcohol in their own home or another person's house; maybe being at a party and parents providing or maybe knowing alcohol is going to be there and not doing anything about it. There was somewhat of a permissive attitude, maybe it was letting the kids drink every now and then in their own home."

In the 2016 Illinois Youth Survey, the latest available, 45 percent of Oak Park and River Forest seniors perceive that most adults in their neighborhood think it is acceptable for kids their age to use alcohol, a number that is consistently above state norms. The survey also revealed that 38 percent of Oak Park and River Forest eighth-through 12th-graders who had consumed alcohol within the past month reported getting it from their parents.

And it is not uncommon for parents, perhaps acquiescing to their teens' expectations, to provide prom-goers with access to alcohol.

In an interview with an Oak Park mom of two OPRF graduates, who did not want to be identified, she spoke firsthand about parental permissiveness around prom. She recalled a conversation she had a few years back with parents who had rented a house in Indiana for "prom weekend." The parents indicated that alcohol would be available at the house and they were looking for other parents chaperone. They told this mom, "You just need to be there in case someone needs to go to the emergency room."

The mom was taken aback by this attitude. She told the parents that she would chaperone, "but there would be no alcohol" under her watch. Some parents, she said, know that "their kids had been drinking all school year." Prom was just another chance to drink, so parents might as well acknowledge it.

"The get-real parents" have come to see prom as an opportunity to let their kids know they're aware of teen culture, said Aimee Bates, program coordinator for the Oak Park and River Forest Workgroup for Positive Youth Development (PYD), which oversees an initiative to reduce alcohol consumption among minors. "It doesn't



Students look through fliers, during a HYPE program meeting before class at Oak Park and River Forest High School. (ALEXA ROGALS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

mean that they're bad parents, but they're more focused on -- regardless of whether they set a rule for alcohol or drugs -- the fact that [their] kids are going to do it anyway. So they focus on the risk management part."

Still, there are parents who may not be aware of the social hosting laws on the books in both villages, Bates said.

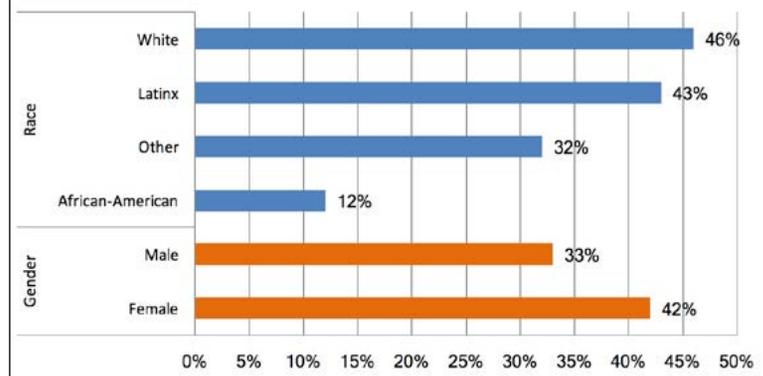
Oak Park's social hosting ordinance states "It is unlawful for any person to host an event or gathering when the host knows or should reasonably know that an underage person: 1). Is consuming or will consume any alcoholic beverage or illicit drugs; or 2). Possesses any alcoholic beverage or illicit drug with the intent to consume it; and 3). The host fails or has failed to take reasonable steps to prevent possession or consumption by the underage person."

The law further says that it is "also unlawful for any person to fail to take reasonable steps to prevent possession or consumption of alcoholic beverages or illicit drugs by an underage person at an event or gathering held at his or her residence or premises."

River Forest's social hosting law has similar language.

While OPRF isn't taking drastic steps such as holding proms on school nights and requiring next-day attendance as one upstate New York school decided to do several years ago, it has put together a nine-page prom

Alcohol Use in Past 30 Days by Race and Gender



2016 Illinois Youth Survey (IYS): Youth "agree" or "strongly agree" responses

packet. One page has specific tips for parents. One states, "Never allow underage drinking on your property."

And last week, about a month before prom, the high school co-sponsored a "Safe and Sober Prom" discussion at Live Café on Oak Park Avenue. A small group of parents, some with seniors at OPRF and others whose children have graduated, came out.

"The lake house" question came up, said Barb Hickey, a member of both PYD and the District 90 River Forest Elementary school board. "It's not a popular stand to take to say [to prom-goers], 'You're not going to the lake house.'"

When you consider "boys and girls and overnight. What can possibly go wrong?" she asked, somewhat rhetorically.

A big concern expressed during the discussion centered on post prom activities, Hickey said. "What we wanted to do was offer a chance for people to talk candidly about some of the challenges involved with the prom," especially related to alcohol.

What Hickey said she would tell her own kids, now adults, "I do trust you, but I don't trust the situation."

Quite a few OPRF parents may find themselves saying that, too, as the lure of "the lake house" beckons again this year.

Shared experience, blunt warnings

OPRF students teach real life lessons to peers

By **CASSANDRA WEST**
Contributing Reporter

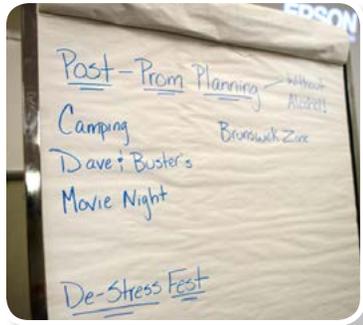
On this Thursday morning, the freshman in Mr. Campbell's health class are getting a lesson on "The Blunt Truth," but he won't be teaching it. Instead, two seniors, Abby Sacks and Carolyn Santos, are at the front of the class.

The health class is on its drug and alcohol unit for the semester, and Abby and Carolyn are here to do a workshop on the straight facts about marijuana use for the some 27 students. The teens know their stuff and are well prepared to not only give these freshman solid information but confidently answer their questions.

They are members of OPRF's Healthy Youth Peer Educators program, started two years ago by Ginger Colamussi, the school's social work and prevention and wellness coordinator. HYPE students teach workshops in various classes throughout the year.

"When I developed HYPE, I modeled it after peer educator programs that are common at colleges and universities," Colamussi said. "Having a peer educator program is unique at the high school level and is a powerful opportunity for our students to hear directly from their peers about the importance of making healthy choices that can positively impact their lives."

Students training students has unparalleled appeal because it's effective.



While Kevin Campbell could have easily taught the unit, Abby and Carolyn bring something many adults can't: common experiences.

After getting lots of requests from teachers to come into class and give presentations, Colamussi felt that students were already spending all day listening to their teachers talk about topics and having other adults come in and give them information. "So I thought it might be more powerful for students to hear that information from their peers, from other students who are actually going through what they're going through, living those same experiences and could effectively speak to how they're making healthy and positive choices in their lives," she said.

That is exactly what motivated Carolyn. "I joined (HYPE) because I've been a part of a lot of bad happenings with my friends," she said, "whether though sexual assault, rapes, drug abuse, depression, domestic violence -- the whole rainbow of it. Doing this meant



ALEXA ROGALS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

"Being in this program and knowing what I know about the negative effects has definitely helped me to say, 'No, I don't want to because I have heard and learned about what [substances] could do to me and how bad it could be.'"

— **Monica Bradford**,
sophomore, HYPE member

that I would be able to tell people the signs that they can find that they're not doing OK and where they can go to get the help they need."

Abby tells the freshman that there is "a lot of misinformation about the effects of marijuana."

And that's the reason, Abby and Carolyn are here — to deliver "the blunt truth."

They present the lesson in the form of a game.

Carolyn and Abby go over the rules and ask the class to divide into teams and select animal names for them. After some chatter, students toss out the names they've chosen: Penguin, Sharks, Octopus, FSM Flying Spaghetti Monster, Dolphins and Monkey.

First question: "THC, the main active chemical in marijuana, affects the brain by: a. Coating specific parts of the skull b. Binding to specific receptors in the brain c. Shutting down specific parts of the brain."

The correct answer is b.

Sometimes when answers are revealed, Carolyn or Abby shared additional information, showing their command of the subject. At one point, Carolyn goes into depth on explaining the effects of marijuana.

Following some answers, students ask questions. At one point, a male

student tries to counter the amounts of harmful chemicals used in vaping, a trend among high school students that involves inhaling and exhaling an aerosol, often referred to as vapor, produced by an e-cigarette or similar device.

The game goes on for most of the class period. Octopus team wins with 36 points and wins the prize, candy. Abby thanks the freshman for being, for the most part, "attentive."

Abby and Carolyn are pleased with the outcome and in their ability to impart important, and potentially life-saving, information. "Now that I know a lot more, I feel way more comfortable answering questions," Carolyn said.

The full HYPE membership is currently 20 students, ranging from sophomore to seniors, and students must apply, get recommendations, interview and get accepted into the program, Colamussi said. She is open to having more students involved, around 25-30 "to make sure everyone gets quality training."

HYPE students find ways to connect with peers

By the end of this school year, HYPE students will have presented 105 workshops in various classes at OPRF. Currently HYPE has three workshops that peer educators are trained to present: "Husky Strong" teaches four key healthy habits for physical, mental, and social well-being; "The Blunt Truth" teaches the physical, mental, and social effects of marijuana use; and "Friends Helping Friends" teaches a five-step process to intervene and help a friend with a mental health challenge, substance use,

or unhealthy dating relationship.

Last October, HYPE organized and led The Sticker Shock Project, a community awareness project aimed at reducing underage drinking by reducing youth access to alcohol. Leading up to homecoming weekend last fall, HYPE collaborated with Oak Park Township to create and place stickers on over 1,000 bottles and cases of alcohol in two busy grocery stores in Oak Park and River Forest to remind adults that "it is illegal to provide alcohol to a person

under 21." The stickers also encouraged adults "to keep OPRF teens healthy and alcohol-free."

HYPE also sponsors weeklong activities to raise awareness about the risks of drug and alcohol use. Red Ribbon Week activities included handing out red ribbons, collecting pledges to make healthy choices, hosting a healthy selfie contest, running a "Get the WHEEL Facts" trivia game, and sponsoring a community fundraiser.

"We did Red Ribbon Week, a drug and alcohol awareness week" held in October, said Monica Bradford, a sophomore member. "We had games and trivia during lunch period so that people could win things while also educating themselves about the health risks of alcohol and drugs."

HYPE students are planning a De-Stress Fest in May to promote healthy ways to manage stress during finals.

— *Cassandra West*

Survey says: Our teens drink more than most

Some progress,
some setbacks in response

By **CASSANDRA WEST**
Contributing Reporter

Underage drinking rates in Oak Park and River Forest are improving in some areas, according to Illinois Youth Survey (IYS) data. For instance, the “past 30-day” underage drinking rates for 8th graders fell from 19 percent in 2012 to 10 percent in 2016.

The percentage of high school sophomores who report obtaining alcohol at a retail source, however, grew worse from 2014 to 2016, going from 9 percent to 11 percent. The rates at which high school seniors are obtaining alcohol from a retail source was 14 percent higher than that of the 2014 state average.

These statistics made it clear that the two communities have an ongoing problem with underage drinking. To address it, the Oak Park River Forest Workgroup for Positive Youth

Development (PYD) formed as a coalition made up of more than 40 parents, educators, law enforcement officials and other youth-focused organizations, including Success of All Youth.

In March 2015, PYD was awarded a five-year grant from the Federal Center for Substance Abuse Prevention based on Oak Park and River Forest being identified as communities with higher rates of underage drinking compared to the rest of the state. The Illinois Department of Human Services administers the grant.

PYD uses the Strategic Prevention Framework (SPF), a five-step process for preventing substance use and misuse.

Aimee Bates came on board last October to coordinate SPF for the workgroup, which has devised several strategies to combat attitudes toward underage drinking. She is working on implementing compliance checks



STUDENTS FIND THEIR REASON: Aimee Bates, SPF-PSF program coordinator, Barbara Hickey and Kelly O'Connor, FACE-IT coordinator, hold up a sign to help reduce underage drinking, outside of Oak Park Township. (ALEXA ROGALS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

by partnering with the police departments in both villages and educating local businesses. “All we want them to do is card, effectively ID youth,” Bates said. “Youth are telling us in focus groups and surveys that they’re not being carded.”

Any business that holds or sells al-

cohol should be trained to encourage responsible and legal alcohol sales and service, said Bates.

The workshop also launched two ongoing media campaigns, aimed at youth and parents that carry messages such as “Keep OPRF teens healthy & alcohol free” and “When you’re

drinking, you’re not thinking.”

The workgroup also offers a multi-week program called FACE-IT, which stands for Families Acting Collaboratively to Educate and Involve Teens. Parent(s) and youth attend together and can be referred for five, eight or 12 weeks of programming.

For Danny, alcohol was early path to addiction

‘I was lost. Drugs and alcohol kept me lost’

By **CASSANDRA WEST**
Contributing Reporter

The road to recovery from addiction isn’t always straight or smooth. It can be a long one. Danny believes he will be on it the rest of his life.

It has been a year since he became sober, he said over coffee on a recent late Sunday afternoon. “I’ve owned and accepted who I am. My first drink was when I was 15. I didn’t have any idea that I had the desire or mental obsession to drink more and more.”

His drinking started when he

found there was easy access to beer at family parties. He would sneak some and put it under his bed for later. In the beginning, it was only a few beers. The drinking helped his “inhibitions go away,” he said.

Now 24, Danny looks back and realizes what he didn’t know about himself at 15. “I don’t think I was aware of the anxiety and self-esteem and insecurities I had. I definitely had them, but I only realized that later on.”

By his sophomore year at OPRF, Danny had moved on from beer. That’s when he started “smoking weed.” It was easy to obtain. “Weed is everywhere,” he said. “That’s defi-

nately something you can easily find.” By junior year, he was selling it.

The weed, he said, started affecting his school work. “More often than not, I was high.”

His mom caught on, discovering a couple of ounces of marijuana and “a bunch of money” in his backpack.

In time Danny went on to use harder substances, a whole gamut: vodka, pain pills, Xanax. In plain terms, he had an addiction problem. And it was a serious one.

There’s a lot more to Danny’s saga, but suffice it to say that it illustrates what many who study issues around substance abuse know too well: Alco-

hol is the real gateway drug.

“Alcohol was the most widely used substance among respondents, initiated earliest, and also the first substance most commonly used in the progression of substance use,” concluded researchers from Texas A&M and the University of Florida who examined data from 2,800 U.S. high school seniors for an annual federal survey of teen drug use in 2016.

In Danny’s case, alcohol initiated his nine-year struggle. “In a nutshell,” he said, “I was lost for a long time and drugs and alcohol kept me lost.”

Then in February 2017, after having sought help from other institu-

tions like Hazelden in Minnesota, Danny found his way to The Way Back Inn, a Maywood-based rehabilitation center with a primary focus on substance abuse treatment.

“What Way Back Inn did was provide me an environment where I would be held accountable. I’d be drug tested. I’d be held accountable.”

The help he has gotten has given him confidence, too, that he can help others.

Of the recovery program, he said, “It’s an opportunity to learn, be honest and to help others, which in turn helps myself.”