

Some Myths Debunked

Students Get Hard Facts

Second in a 3-part series
BY SHARON DARNIEDER

Are teenagers themselves concerned about excessive drinking?

"I can understand drinking if you're at a party," said Pete Hyk, 16, a junior at Bishop Kearney High School, "but I think it's foolish just drinking to get drunk. It's a waste of time and money and I just can't see it."

Bob Blades, 16, and John DeSanctis, 17, two of his classmates, echoed his thoughts.

Although none of them have reached the legal drinking age, they agreed that if they had a friend who they thought was headed for trouble because he drank while driving, or drank to excess frequently, they'd try to help.

"Sure, I'd be concerned," said Blades.

Some hard-hitting facts on alcohol and alcoholics, presented by Raymond A. Selke, director of the National Council on Alcoholism (a chapter of the Health Association of Rochester and Monroe County), recently caused their religion class at Bishop Kearney to think seriously about both.

The program was typical of those the National Council on Alcoholism, 973 East Ave., conducts for schools, industries and professional groups. Alcohol education is part of what the council does for the community. It also maintains a resource information library.

In response to Selke's question, none of the class had any trouble naming the most acceptable night in the year to get drunk, New Year's Eve, and the most frequent weekday evening, Friday, after a week's work and a paycheck.

Using the above examples as the kinds of attitudes about drinking the young grow up with, he added, "It's not coincidental that you already know what the dates are whether you drink or not. That's the way our society is."

Blades voiced another "traditional" attitude.

"I don't associate well-dressed, nice-mannered people with alcoholics," he said. "I think of them as being like those I see on TV, stupid, clumsy, dumb. The skid row type."

"There is no typical alcoholic personality," Selke said. "It affects those in all walks of life."

(According to the Alcoholism Information and Counseling Center, another community agency concerned with alcoholics, the skid row alcoholic represents less than 5 per cent of the total number of alcoholics.)

"There are about 90 million people over 15 who use alcohol in this country," said Selke, "and out of these about 10 million have serious alcohol problems."

He said that although there is a widespread concern over teenage drinking, there aren't many teenage alcoholics, "because alcoholism usually takes from five to ten years to develop."

He added that even though it's unusual, teenage alcoholism does exist, and he cautioned the class that the roots of the disease often stems from the teen years when drinking usually starts.

"Most young people by the age of 14 have tasted alcohol," he said.

He told the class that although a social drinker will sometimes get drunk, "that doesn't mean he's an alcoholic."

"A social drinker drinks second to an event, such as a party," he said. "He has a reason to drink."

On the other hand, he noted that alcoholics "use alcohol as a drug, to solve a problem. Once they begin drinking they can't stop. An alcoholic is characterized by a loss of control."

But if many teens who drink frequently are underage, how do they get the liquor?



Raymond A. Selke at Bishop Kearney High.

Photo by Susan McKinney

Teenage Drinkers: Our Future Alcoholics?

"I've found that they're pretty strict in taverns which young people frequent," said Selke. "They're good about checking ID's."

"Those who do drink a lot when they're underage probably get the liquor at a party where an older friend who can buy it legally provides it, or sometimes some parents feel that if their child is going to drink, they'd rather that he drink in the home," he continued.

In answer to a question, Selke emphasized that "all alcoholic beverages are serious. They don't increase in seriousness as you go from, say beer to wine. Many alcoholics favor beer."

Another myth he pointed out to the class is the belief that all alcoholics drink every day. "They don't. Some go for days, weeks or months without one and suddenly begin drinking again."

"The line between a social drinker and an alcoholic is invisible," said Selke, "and science doesn't know where that line is. No matter who uses alcohol he stands one chance in ten out of becoming an alcoholic."

He added that once you cross over that line and become one, the only way you can recover is never to drink again.

How you feel before you begin drinking often determines your mood after you start drinking, according to Selke.

"How much you've eaten, whether you're tired, happy or depressed. Any of these will affect your drinking," he said. "With a youngster, drinking seems to magnify the emotions. Inhibitions are often let go."

He warned that other factors, such as how much food is in your stomach at the time, the number of drinks taken or body weight, can influence how alcohol affects you and how long it stays in your body.

He also warned them of high alcoholic tolerance, saying "one of the first things we look for is when a person says he drinks a lot but never feels it."

"High tolerance for alcohol is one of the danger signs of possible alcoholism in later years," he added.

'Many Alcoholics Favor Beer'

Dwelling on the ramifications of drinking for teens, he noted that their chances of getting caught if they drive while drinking are "greater than an older person because someone older has more driving experience."

"It's never okay to drink and drive," he emphasized, "but the older person does have more experience. For the young it's the combination of inexperienced drinking and inexperienced driving that increases the possibility of getting hurt in an auto accident. The chances of getting killed in a car between the ages of 16 and 21 are phenomenal."

(Statistics given by Joan Ford at the Center for Governmental Research in Rochester, a private, non-profit group, show that arrests for Driving While Intoxicated (DWI) by State Police in a six-county area (Monroe, Livingston, Ontario, Seneca, Wayne and Yates), for those 16-19 years of age in 1971 numbered 53 out of 699 arrests or 7.6 per cent.)

In addition to damaging your overall mental and physical health, alcoholism can shorten your life expectancy by as much as 12 years, Selke said.

(According to the Monroe County Health Department, there were 69 deaths in Monroe County due to alcohol in 1972 — 51 males and 18 females. The youngest was 25.)

Statistics collected by the Monroe County Debilitated Alcoholic Committee (part of the Monroe County Committee for Alcoholism Planning) working with the Genesee Regional Health Planning Council, which has a contract with the State Department of Mental Hygiene, Division of Alcoholism, show that Rochester public intoxication arrests have risen in the past three years for those 21 and under.

'There Is No Typical Alcoholic'

Their findings showed approximately 270 arrested for public intoxication in 1971, 370 in 1972 and 350 in 1973. (Total for 1973 does not include arrests for December.)

The planning council's contract with the state agency is for the purpose of developing comprehensive alcohol plans for the 10-county Genesee Region — all of which are represented by committees. Their findings are given to the council which in turn will present it to the state.

Kathleen Scheg, alcoholism planner for the council, said the group collected the statistics during their research in determining the extent of the public intoxication problem in Monroe County.

However, she also pointed out that although the arrests took place in the city, "this does not necessarily mean that those who were arrested live in the city."

Selke thinks education programs like the council's are valuable and well received.

"We come in to answer the unanswered questions about alcohol after the teachers are finished presenting their material," he said, "and we try to reach the kids on their level by telling them how drinking will affect their lives."

"Teen drinking is a problem because alcohol is so widely accepted," he continued. "The other drugs are dangerous but they don't have the impact of alcohol because of this acceptance."

NEXT WEEK: Why those helping alcoholics are concerned about the rising number of teens who turn to drink.