

Substance Abuse

The Greatest Risk of All

Through powerful testimonials and an intense multimedia program, Friday Night Live convinces teens about the dangers of drinking and driving.



California Highway Patrolman Jim Simpson talks to teens as part of the Friday Night Live program.

Darlene, a 17-year-old college-bound senior, was riding home after a movie with two friends when a car driven by Mitch, another senior, crashed into her vehicle from behind, propelling it 100 feet into a tree. Darlene was killed instantly. Her second companion, 18-year-old Marilyn, died a few hours later, while the third escaped with minor injuries. Mitch, partying and drinking after a football game victory, was sentenced to five years in the state penitentiary.

Every Friday and Saturday night, this scene is replayed throughout the United States. Young adults are killed or crippled for life, while other teens, some of whom may face prison, must live with the guilt of unwittingly causing these tragedies, all due to the greatest risk of all to teenagers: *drinking and driving*. More than two out of three teens drink, one out of four drinks weekly, and more teens die and are injured in drinking and driving accidents than in any other manner (NIDA 1987, Insurance Institute for Highway Safety 1981). Drinking is a national rite of passage for teens, and we, the concerned adults, seem unable to guide them.

Now a unique program in California, adapted from a program in Washington called "Friday Night Live," has demonstrated that teens *can* be reached, that they can learn to party and have fun without drinking.

In Terms They Understand

The heart of the Friday Night Live program is a 15-minute multimedia program. Presented to a high school student body in the gym, this fast-paced production is supported by two 500-watt speakers that belt out the accompanying music at levels that teens like.

The program begins with pictures of teenagers, kids their age, partying. The audience responds with yells and hand-clapping. On the screen, beer flows and people dance. Suddenly, the students see a simulated arrest. They hear about the effects alcohol has on them and about the costs of being arrested DUI (driving under the influence). Then they hear the story of Candy, a teenager who loses an eyelid in an accident while out on a date with Scott, who drank too much at the drive-in theater.

The lights go on. On stage are mothers and fathers of victims who, with faltering tones, tell their stories. They frequently cry as they recount being awakened by the coroner, hearing the last words of their son or daughter repeated by a stranger over the phone, or seeing their child die 20 feet from the driveway. An eerie silence cloaks the teenage crowd.

Teens Talking to Teens

Prior to the assembly, program staff have recruited teens from the school who have had firsthand experiences in one form or another with drinking and driving. After the mothers and fathers have told their stories, these young people come on stage, some scared to death to speak in front of their fellow students. They come to share how it felt to lose a father or brother or how they hate to see a friend going home with a drunken date. These testimonials are powerful; the teens in the audience seem to really believe what their friends on stage have to say. This is no longer something in a book; this is *real!*

Next, a student leader, the president of Students Against Driving Drunk, and the leader of the area's Friday Night Live chapter address the stu-

dents. "Join us and sign up to be a part of our group," they invite. And the kids do. That day, 30 to 35 percent of the student body will join the student group. They will pledge to avoid drinking and driving, will have the pledge cards signed by their parents, and will participate in campaigns during the year to persuade their peers to party safely.

At Any Cost

Friday Night Live works. Not only do the students learn about the dangers of drinking and driving in a manner they understand, but they join student groups that are present at parties, offer to be "designated (nondrinking) drivers," and support "Safe Rides" programs.

By reducing up to 25 percent the number of students who get injured or die on California highways (Wyatt 1986), Friday Night Live has shown itself to be cost-effective. But any cost would be acceptable, to you or me, if we saved one life—the life of your child. □

References

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