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Changing the Culture of Underage Drinking

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According to the 2007 California Healthy Kids Survey*, 48% of 11th graders in the Acalanes Union High School District (AUHSD) reported having been drunk or sick from using alcohol; in addition, 22% of 11th graders, and 11% of 9th graders, reported having been drunk on school property. Reviewing these figures was the main trigger for Renee Breber and Roxy Klein, Healthy Choices Co-Chairs at Campolindo High School Parents' Club, to act. "We were fairly alarmed when we read the figures of alcohol and marijuana consumption," said Klein, "Our goal is to educate and create awareness in our community and see if we can change the culture around underage drinking." The first element of their plan is a discussion panel that will be conducted on March 8 at 7 p.m. in the Campolindo library. The presenters will be Dr. Jan Gurley, Campolindo Principal Carol Kitchens, Moraga Police Chief Robert Priebe, and defense attorney Mary P. Carey.

Breber and Klein had heard Gurley speak on this topic last fall at Miramonte and they were impressed by what she had to say. Gurley is a board-certified internist who sees patients at a clinic for the homeless. She writes for the City Brights blogs on SFGate.com and has a Web site at www.docgurley.com. "Parents need to be given the most relevant medical and physiological facts," says Gurley, "they sometimes allow their children to drink because they are not sufficiently informed about the teens' brain development." Gurley believes that the younger teens are exposed to alcohol, higher is the risk for addiction and trauma. "It changes the way the brain becomes wired as it finishes growing," she says, "changes may become permanent, and it is the same thing with marijuana and other drugs." Gurley thinks that parents' behaviors have an impact on their offspring as well. "Parents could be modeling a social life that does not revolve around drinking," adds Gurley, "exhibiting prudent behavior and respect of the law should be the norm."

Other than getting physiological facts about alcohol and other substance abuse, adults who attend the presentation will gain tools to help change the culture. They will get a better understanding of the law as it pertains to underage drinking, and will learn about the legal liability parents undertake if there is underage drinking in their home or at unsupervised parties. They will also find out about Campolindo High School's rules regarding underage drinking. "Campolindo's Parent Club and Healthy Choices committee felt we should come together as a community to share knowledge, answer questions and provide tools on how to change the culture of underage drinking in the Lamorinda area," says Kitchens, "Parents are encouraged to attend so they can understand the facts and what the school, police and community can and cannot do in regards to underage drinking."

The Moraga Police Department reported that it handled four juvenile DUI cases in 2009, along with seven cases of a minor in possession of alcohol, one drunk and disorderly case, three false ID cases, seven possession of marijuana cases, one possession of a controlled substance case, and six danger to self or others cases involving drugs or alcohol. "I accepted the invitation to participate in the Campolindo panel because I have always assisted the Healthy Choices group and absolutely feel it is part of my duty to inform and interact with the community on issues involving our youth," says Chief Priebe.

Breber and Klein have more events planned. Ralph Cantor, Drug and Violence Prevention Coordinator for the Alameda County Office of Education, will be coming in April to talk about marijuana to 9th graders and their parents. "We would like Dr. Gurley to be able to talk to the seniors in the spring," adds Breber, "At the same time, the results of the 2009 survey will come out and we'll see the latest trends. But whatever the results, we have to do something and push back, at least make a dent in the percentages."

*AUHSD survey key findings can be found at www.wested.org/chks/pdf/rpts_dl/f07s_07_61630.pdf

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