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Special Acalanes assembly shows consequences of drug use

By Pippa Fisher

Parents are encouraged to engage their children in conversation about the choices and consequences surrounding drugs and alcohol following a powerful presentation on the subject that their children had been shown earlier that day.

Acalanes High School offers the "Up2U" assembly, which is hosted in part by the Acalanes Parents' Club only once every three years due to costs involved. The program is a collaboration between staff, students and parents.

The program's host, Tim Barley, a chaplain with the Contra Costa County Fire Prevention District, introduced the speakers. Using real-life scenarios and live presentations to impart the far-reaching consequences of drug and alcohol abuse to teens, the students heard in detail from firefighter Chris DeMeo of his experience responding to an alcohol-related crash during which a local teen lost his life. He told in detail what it was like as he stayed with the fatally wounded student in his last moments.

The audience then heard from Granada High School student Travis Palma who explained how, at a time of his life when he was left virtually parentless and unsupervised, he was able to steer away from negative choices. The young man said he decided to surround himself with positive friends and set challenges for himself as a real life cowboy, riding bulls, demonstrating that good choices don't necessarily mean boring choices.

Finally, one mother described her heartbreaking discovery of their happy, loving and high-achieving son's death from a drug overdose. Pam and Ken Rogers lost their son Scott, a student at Monte Vista High School, several years ago. Ken Rogers spoke of the far-reaching impact of the choices made by Scott and of the guilt carried by his son's friends. He stressed the need to end the "code of silence" that prevents teens from getting help for their friends who might be in trouble.

Indeed, the main message to the students was to consider the choices and consequences of their decisions. And for the parents, the message was to "have the hard conversation."

Following the parent presentation, a panel consisting of the speakers joined by school counselors Mary Threlkel and Allison Gans took questions. Several parents commented that their students told them that the assembly had been "very sad."

Acalanes Principal Travis Bell made the point that the students had been encouraged to approach counselors following the presentation should they want to and said that the following day several students had taken advantage of that. He said that it isn't unusual for teens to need time to process the information.

Although the irony of the presentation falling on April 20 was not lost on some parents - 420 has long been code for marijuana smokers - Bell pointed out that it was not deliberate, but that offering the program before Prom and during "Prom-Wise week" was deliberate.

With legislation that will legalize marijuana in California, parents were reminded of the dangers to the teen brain, including diminished IQ. Bell made the point that despite how culture celebrates its use, research is clear - marijuana is addictive and leads to cancer at five times the rate of cigarettes.

"We are so fortunate that we have the staff and parent support to run such an important program," Bell said. "The need to challenge our students to pause and think critically about the effect their choices can have is of the utmost importance as we engage the whole child."

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