

Police chief: Teen drinking isn't a rite of passage

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Parents of teenagers are often lulled into a false sense of security regarding alcohol, one which can have devastating consequences.

Some parents believe if they keep their son or daughter out of a vehicle driven by fellow teenagers, they have succeeded in protecting them from the dangers of underage drinking.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

La Grande Police Chief Brian Harvey, drawing upon 26 years of law enforcement experience, made this point persuasively Tuesday night during a town hall meeting at EOU focused on addressing the use of alcohol by youths in Union County.

"Parents think that as long as their son or daughter doesn't drive with someone who has been drinking they will be OK," Harvey said.

They are right in that their child is protected from the dangers of drunken driving, but parents need to realize that alcohol's deadly hand can still strike their children.

Harvey stressed that alcohol is at the heart of many crimes and tragedies outside of drunken driving accidents. The police chief pointed out that in a high degree of accidental shootings, alcohol is involved.

"I do not remember handling an accidental shooting case in which alcohol was not involved," Harvey said.

He also emphasized alcohol is often linked to sexual assault. Harvey noted that 90 percent of the victims of sexual assault had been using alcohol.

"You are much more vulnerable if you have been drinking," Harvey said.

Twin sisters Hannah, left, and Hailey Hulse, freshmen at Cove High School, give underage drinking statistics for Union County during a town hall at EOU on Tuesday. The sisters are members of the Youth Commission of the Union County Safe Communities Coalition. DICK MASON / The Observer

The police chief recalled one case in which a man used alcohol to make nine women vulnerable and then sexually assaulted them. That man is now in prison.

The police chief has seen many people seriously injured in mishaps involving alcohol. One was a drunken man involved in a shoving match who fell and pierced an eye in a fall. He lost his vision in the eye.

Harvey also has seen alcohol bring lifetimes of shame to innocent teenagers.

He recalled that in one community he served in a 15- or 16-year-old girl who had been drinking found herself in a compromising position with a boy. She was too intoxicated to realize that the boy's friends were taping the sexual encounter. The recording was put on the Internet.

"It went out there for the community and the entire world to see."

A video that will forever be in cyberspace.

"Once something is placed on it (the Internet), it can never be pulled. It will never be pulled back for the rest of the girl's life," Harvey said.

The police chief said that too often adults regard the use of alcohol by teens as a part of growing up.

“It isn’t a rite of passage. It causes some severe harm,” said Harvey at the town hall, sponsored by the Union County Safe Communities Coalition.

Stefanie Duncan, a crisis response advocate from Shelter from The Storm, also gave a primary address at the town hall.

Duncan addressed how susceptible alcohol makes one to sex crimes.

“Alcohol is a huge part of sexual assault,” Duncan said.

She explained that alcohol can render someone helpless and thus make them a prime target.

Duncan said people who commit sexual assault are always looking for people unable to protect themselves. She noted that this is why people with disabilities are at a higher risk of sexual assault.

Duncan also noted that those who commit sex crimes often do so under the influence of alcohol. Forty percent of the people in prison for sexual assault committed their crime while under the influence of alcohol.

Underage drinking is widespread in the United States and Union County is no exception to the rule, people attending the town hall learned.

Statistics from a 2010 Student Wellness Survey in Union County presented by members of the Youth Commission of Union County Safe Communities Coalition brought this point home.

Some of the most alarming indicate that 11.8 is the average age in which teenagers in Union County who now use alcohol started drinking and that 16.7 percent of eighth graders and 46.2 percent of 11th graders in Union County consume alcohol every 30 days.

The town hall concluded with a panel discussion focusing on what can be done to address the underage drinking problem. Many on the panel spoke of the importance of community members stepping forward to address the issue.

Jan Harris, a panel member and the director of La Grande High School’s career center, spoke of how important it is for students to have an adult at their school they can turn to for guidance.

“It is critical that every kid at school knows someone who cares about them,” Harris said.

Harvey spoke of the importance of people reaching out to others making bad decisions.

“Being a true friend means stepping up when someone goes down the wrong road.”