

Underage drinking is never okay

By Eileen M. Daly

Last Wednesday's Forum on Teen Drinking, hosted by the Teen Center, conveyed a clear message: underage drinking is never okay.

The panelists included Robin Monica, mother of Jeff Monica who died in a 2003 car accident while under the influence of alcohol, Officer Mark Esposito from the Jamestown Police Department, State Rep. Bruce Long, and Glenn Miller from the Rhode Island Employee Assistance Program.

The forum was sponsored by the Jamestown Parks and Recreation Department, the Jamestown Teen Center, the Jamestown Police Department and Representative Bruce Long. Bill Piva, director of parks and recreation, served as host.

Robin Monica opened the forum with her poignant story of loss. On May 29, 2003, her 19-year-old son Jeff was tragically killed when the car he was driving hit a telephone pole at a high rate of speed. After the accident Monica said she learned that her son had "had a few beers while watching a movie with friends."

The combination of alcohol and speed was a lethal one, Monica said, and one they never imagined would happen to them. "We always told our son that never, under any circumstances, was he to drink and drive or get in the car with someone who had been drinking," she said, "I wish we had emphasized not drinking while underage at all."

Officer Mark Esposito provided some comparative statistics. Last year in Jamestown there were five underage DUI arrests and 10 underage possession arrests while this year there have been eight underage DUI arrests and 13 underage possession arrests to date, he said.

Officer Esposito pointed to increased awareness as a possible factor in the rising number of arrests. Although law enforcement can play a role in preventing underage drinking and officers can help to prevent tragedies by arresting



Glenn Miller talks to parents and teens about the effects of exposure to alcohol during the teen years. Miller was one of five speakers at the Teen Drinking Forum held on July 29.

Photo by Andrea von Hohenleiten

or holding underage drinkers until their parents pick them up, the first line of defense lies with the parents, he said.

State Rep. Bruce Long (R-Jamestown, Middletown) echoed these comments. "The attitudes of parents have to change," he said. "We can no longer afford to have a culture of acceptance." Long added that though the legislative process is a slow one, progress is being made.

Long said recent legislation that provides for a mandatory loss of license for a period of 30 days for underage drinking was a step in the right direction.

Glenn Miller, director of Rhode Island Employee Assistance, talked at length about the challenges that families face while raising teenagers. "It is often a time of sadness," he said.

"Children are becoming more independent, limits are being tested and parents may feel pressured to just give up and give in," Miller said. "It is vitally important, however, that parents not give in to this pressure."

Numerous research studies in-

dicating that parental attitudes play a significant role in whether or not children develop later problems with alcohol, Miller said. "Children who drink before the age of 15 face a significantly increased risk of developing alcohol and/or drug problems later on," he said, "While those that do not drink until they are 21 or older show an almost non-existent risk of having later substance abuse problems."

Parents need to give themselves permission to be parents, Miller said. There is no safe form of alcohol and the message to children needs to be clear and specific according to Miller. Parents should tell their children, "I love you and it will never be okay with me for you to drink while you are underage," he said.

Audience members included Laura Hosley, coordinator of the Jamestown Substance Abuse Prevention Task Force, task force member Melissa Mastrostefano and Councilwoman Barbara Szepatowski, along with concerned parents and residents. Many young people, under 21, also attended the discussion.



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