

Dangers of alcohol

Several reasons to avoid underage drinking

By Joe Godfrey
Alabama Citizens Action Program

When I talk to schoolchildren and young adults about the use of alcohol, I give them four sound reasons why they shouldn't drink.

One, alcohol is a mind-altering and addictive drug. Studies show that young people who start drinking in their teen years are much more likely to become problem drinkers and alcohol dependent. In fact, according to government surveys, of adults who started drinking before age 15, about 40 percent say they have the signs of alcohol dependence. That rate is four times higher than for adults who didn't drink until they were 21.

Two, alcohol kills. Nationwide about 5,000 people under the age of 21 die each year from car crashes, homicides, suicides, alcohol poisoning and a variety of injuries as a direct result of underage drinking, reports the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA). In any given year, more than 190,000 people under the age of 21 will visit an emergency room for alcohol-related injuries, according to the NIAAA.

Three, alcohol is costly. I don't mean in the price of a bottle of beer, wine or liquor. I mean in the economic costs resulting from the problems associated with drinking. Underage drinking alone cost U.S. citizens \$62 billion in 2010, according to the Underage Drinking Enforcement Training Center. Those costs include medical care, work loss and pain and suffering associated with the use of alcohol by youths. In Alabama, the tab tops \$1 billion. Of course, the costs associated with adult problem drinking, to which many of these young drinkers will graduate, runs into the hundreds of billions of dollars each year.

'You just aren't yourself'

Four, alcohol makes you do bad things. From committing crimes and violent acts to driving while intoxicated to engaging in risky behavior and promiscuity, you just aren't yourself when you drink. Under the influence of alcohol, people do things they ordinarily would never do. And they don't perform well in school, work or athletics either. Alcohol brings out the worst in you, not the best.

When it comes to alcohol, Alabama Citizens Action Program (ALCAP) advocates abstinence for everyone. The message about the dangers alcohol poses to those under age is one our young people especially need to hear.

That is why I am pleased the Alabama Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) Board has launched a new initiative, "Under Age, Under Arrest," with the purpose of reduc-

ing underage and binge drinking. And it is why ALCAP has joined the ABC Board and other state agencies and organizations such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving in this campaign to convince students to say no to alcohol.

To some, ALCAP and the ABC Board may seem a strange alliance. They see the ABC Board as only a vehicle through which the state of Alabama sells liquor.

However, they miss the bigger picture. Alabama is not in the "liquor business." Through the ABC Board, Alabama is in the alcoholic beverage "control" business.

The repeal of Prohibition in the 1930s gave states the authority to regulate, control and limit the flow of alcoholic beverages. Alabama wisely established the ABC Board to regulate alcohol for the benefit and safety of its citizens.

And it's working for the citizens of Alabama.

Alabama ranks 48th among the states in consumption of alcohol per adult, but it's at the top in tax revenue per unit of alcohol sold. That means our system of control nets the most revenue to help pay for essen-

tial state services without having to push liquor sales. In fact, states like Alabama that have strong controls on alcohol sales consistently rank lowest in consumption and highest in taxes generated.

Conversely noncontrol states generally have more stores selling liquor, with those stores offering their products at expanded hours — some 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Those states also are bombarded with more alcohol advertising and promotions, to which children are especially susceptible.

Alabama doesn't need a store on nearly every street selling liquor all day and all night. And we don't need more advertising enticing our young people to drink.

It is children and young adults the ABC Board is trying to save from the dangers of alcohol. Their young bodies, developing brains and level of maturity are poorly suited to handle such an addictive and powerful drug.

We want Alabama's young people to live alcohol-free. Achieving that requires state agencies such as the ABC Board, organizations such as ALCAP and individuals from various backgrounds — all working to spread the message that alcohol and youth simply don't mix.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Joe Godfrey is executive director of Alabama Citizens Action Program and American Character Builders (www.alcap.com). His email address is jgodfrey@alcap.com. For more information about "Under Age, Under Arrest," visit www.underage-underarrest.com. ☛



GODFREY



Photo by Melanie Smith

Gwenda Mullins (standing, left) and Jessica Hagemore (standing, right) sing 'O Holy Night' during the Christmas party at Woodland Haus in Cullman.

Spreading Christmas cheer

West Cullman churches minister at assisted living centers

Melanie Smith
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

Along with about 20 of her fellow residents, Mavis Wooten, 91, snacked and chatted with visitors Dec. 17, 2013, at Woodland Haus in Cullman, an assisted living center.

When one of the helpers came by her table with reindeer antler headbands, she smilingly donned a set and sang along to "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer."

The retired English teacher said the volunteers from churches in West Cullman Baptist Association who come each year to give a Christmas party are always friendly and caring.

The party, which included gifts for every resident, was not a one-time activity for the associational Woman's Missionary Union (WMU). And 2013 was not even the 10th or 20th Christmas in a row they have done it. The commitment has gone on more than three decades. And the recipients of the gifts and visits are not just in one facility.

Churches band together to provide gifts for every nursing home and assisted living resident in Cullman County — about 660 of them in eight facilities in 2013. Volunteers bring filled gift bags, conduct devotionals, sing, pray, provide refreshments and visit with residents.

They have been doing it since 1981, according to Iva Nell Rodgers, associational WMU director, and Vicki Nix of the association office. In 2013, 48 to 50 of the 60 churches in the association collected items or sent money to buy them, Rodgers said.

Hilda Wise, nursing home parties' leader for the WMU team, said it is a big job but she has a good committee. They make sure every resident is remembered. One facility alone has 205 residents.

Items and gift bags come in from churches to the associational office each year until they

overflow two rooms. Volunteers make sure bags have necessities, like shampoo and body wash, along with Scriptures and extras like cookies and calendars. The workers conduct two parties each Tuesday and Thursday during a two-week span in December.

The project prompted an overflow response in 2013, Rodgers said. She thinks the success is a holdover from 2012, when volunteers crocheted enough curly scarves to give each woman resident.

"Everyone got excited" in 2012, and it made the ladies who participated want to come back in 2013, Rodgers said.

'They're jewels'

Jack Collins, associational missionary for West Cullman Association, said it is really meaningful that WMU does this, and the staffs at the facilities count on it. "They're jewels," he said of the dedicated volunteers.

Pat Williamson, WMU director for Panama Baptist Church, West Point, said her congregation has specifically hosted Woodland Haus's party for six years and provided gifts for all the residents. Her relative Hazel Williamson was a resident there but died recently.

"We love all of the ladies and men and just keep on doing it," she said.

Williamson said WMU sponsors the project, but the church, which has about 22 active members, includes the project in its budget and everyone helps.

Volunteer Gwen Welch of New Prospect Baptist Church said she had already helped at two of the earlier parties and made time Dec. 17 to go again.

"Nursing homes need more volunteers to help, and to me it's really rewarding," she said.

Wooten said she does not often get to attend First Baptist Church, Cullman, where she has been a member since 1956 and formerly taught women for 27 years.

"This party means the people care for us and haven't forgotten us," she said. ☛