

“Words to be Heard” Scholarship

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Underage drinking and driving is a problem that needs to be addressed by the community and it needs to be solved before any more of our nation's youth die untimely deaths. If a friend of mine were killed in an accident after drinking alcohol at a party and then driving home, I would be devastated. This is a very eye-opening topic because it really could happen in any community at any time. I would feel partially responsible for the death of a friend because there are many things I could have tried to do to stop him or her

from driving while under the influence of alcohol.

Here is a typical situation: it's a Friday night and a girl's parents are out of town so she decides to throw a house party and she invites everybody she knows from school. She expects about fifty people to come so she convinces her older sister, who is in college, to buy seven cases of beer for the party. The party starts at nine o'clock, but you and your friends have made arrangements to meet there at ten. When you get there your best friend has been there for forty-five minutes and has already started drinking. Everybody is having a good time. You know that you are spending the night there but you haven't talked to your friend yet about it; you assume that since he is drinking he is also staying overnight. A couple of hours go by and you know that your friend has had three or four drinks while having a good time at the party. Then your friend comes up to you to say that he'll see you later, he's going home. You ask him if he thinks he's okay to drive after the drinks he's had. He assures you that he only had four drinks and it was over the course of a few hours. You think to yourself that he's not really drunk; he can

walk and talk fine. You know it is only a few minutes drive to his house and he doesn't need to drive on any major roads, so he should be okay. You tell him goodbye and to be careful driving home. He says he will call you when he gets home to let you know that he made it home all right, and you go on enjoying the party. You lose track of time and then realize it has been an hour and he hasn't called you yet. You start to worry, but another friend tells you that he probably just forgot to call you; that he was tired and went to bed right away. You decide he's probably right and you go to sleep, too.

When you wake up the next morning, you see on the front page of the newspaper that a local teen was killed in a one-car accident in your township. You immediately remember that your friend did not call you back the night before and you hope to God that it wasn't him. You read the article and you learn that your suspicions are true. One of your best friends was killed in an accident. You read that his blood-alcohol level was .10, which is over the legal limit for both adults and minors.

You blame yourself; you think of all of the things that you could have done to prevent the fatality. You could have told him that he had had too many drinks to get behind the wheel. You could have called a taxi and told him that you would pick him up in the morning to get his car. Since you weren't drinking you could have driven him home in his own car and made the long walk back to the party. You could have driven him to his house and just slept there yourself and then in the morning he could have driven you to pick up your car. There are so many things you could have done, but you didn't because you believed him when he said that he was okay to drive. You feel completely responsible for the accident. You are upset that you lost a friend but you are also devastated because of what his family has to go through because of you. Now his younger sister will have to grow up without a big brother looking out for her. His parents won't get to see him graduate from high school or college. They will not be able to spoil the grandchildren he would have given them someday. You put all the blame on yourself; you feel the need to go talk to his family about what happened the night before

but you don't want to face them because of what they will think of you. This is the worst thing that has ever happened to you.

Although this scenario is sad, it happens all the time. As a community, we must do something about underage drinking because if nothing is done, there will be many more stories similar to this one. We need to do a better job educating minors in schools; we need to do a better job showing them what the consequences will be if they are caught driving under the influence of alcohol, and we need to show what the remains of a wrecked vehicle will look like if they have an accident while driving intoxicated. I know that in elementary school classes we have the D.A.R.E. program that meets a few times a month and tells you about the effects of drugs and alcohol from a law enforcement point of view. In health class we talk about the effects of alcohol for a few days and but we never really learn about how alcohol affects the brain or what can happen to others if we drink and drive. The police force should come into high schools and tell the student body what the consequences will be if they drive under the influence of alcohol and get an underage drinking citation. I think that if they were to do this, then many of the kids would realize that it is a real possibility for somebody to get hurt or killed if they get behind the wheel after having alcohol and they are actually committing a crime and will receive a punishment for their actions.

Another major step we could take as a community to combat minors drinking and driving is to put public service ads on television showing real people that lost somebody close to them from a drunk driver, or by driving drunk. That would really open the eyes of minors and tell them that it's not only a risk of getting a fine or some hours of community service, but show them that they can actually kill themselves or worse, somebody else.

Lastly, we need to give out stricter penalties to people who supply minors with alcohol. Many times, the best way to get rid of a problem is to go right to the source and eliminate it. There is no way for minors to drink alcohol if they can't get anybody to buy it for them, and they can't buy it from stores or bars because they are not yet 21 years old.

That means if we as a community are able to let people know that providing alcohol to minors is in fact a crime and there are huge fines and a possibility of spending time in prison, then there will be no way for minors to get their alcohol. If a friend of mine were to be killed in an accident after getting behind the wheel drunk, and I had the opportunity to stop him from doing so and I didn't, I wouldn't be able to live with myself. Too many people think that it won't happen to them or they think they won't get caught. In order to make the statistics go down, we must make it a priority to spread the word that people who drink and drive will be caught and prosecuted, or worse, killed. Drinking and driving is very dangerous and as a community, it is our responsibility to do whatever we can to get this message to teens. It is not only a risk to the person behind the wheel, but also to other motorists that happen to be on the road. Being killed in an accident while driving drunk is one thing, but killing an innocent passer-by and having to suffer the consequences of the law is another. To live with the knowledge that you took the life of another human being would be overwhelming.

There are many things that can be done by the community to let teens know that drinking and driving has repercussions. This includes providing better education in school and in the media about what can happen and what the penalties can be from drinking and driving, showing what a wreck from a drunk driver looks like and that it is a possibility to get hurt or killed in an accident, and to do a better job at eliminating the suppliers of alcohol to minors. All of these things need to be done before anybody else loses a son or daughter, brother or sister.