**The New American Epidemic-Draft 3**

We have all done it, or will at some point. As much will power you claim to possess, the temptation to consume alcohol while you are underage is just too overpowering. You are in college, the turning point where adolescents turn into adults, and childish immaturity evolves into rational decision-making. Yet, somewhere in the middle of this great transition, there is always the urge to try and have the best of both worlds. That is, act like a crazed child and have a good time, while under the influence of an adult privilege.

Imagine this scenario: you are an eighteen-year-old college freshman, attending your first real college party. There is a keg of beer, and plenty of liquor going around. Everywhere you look, people have red plastic Solo cups in their hands. What those cups are filled with is blatantly obvious to you. There are people around you being loud and acting foolish. Then, it's your turn. A cup is passed your way, and you take it. Never having drunk before, you decide to taste what you have in your hands, though you have no idea what it really is. The drink has a clear appearance to it, with a few bubbles rising to the top of it. You assume it has a carbonated drink in it, such as soda. Once you have swallowed your first gulp, you recognize the familiar taste of Sprite. But it is not the same Sprite you are used to drinking. It has a funny taste to it, as if something is mixed with it. It is a bit harder to swallow as well. Not worried about it, you drink more and more of it. A few drinks later, the ability to control yourself and act rationally has diminished, and after talking to random people, you pass out. The next day you find out you have completely embarrassed yourself. You were told you were yelling random things aloud, calling random people from your cell phone, and other humiliating acts. But one thing puzzles you, you never did find out what was in that drink…

That scenario is as close to reality as it gets for underage college students. In American society today, underage drinking is a major problem. Though we have the highest age restriction to legally purchase and consume alcohol, the United States has the worst problem. Irresponsible drinking never seems to be a problem in other countries where the age restriction is lower. Underage drinking in American commonly contributes to poor decision-making. This may result in an unlimited number of possibilities of harming yourself or others, including driving under the influence. However, the problems that result from being intoxicated never seem to be in the mind of those that decide to drink. Why do the underage even decide to drink? Is it really a necessity to consume alcohol in order to have a good time? Many of those people who believe that it is in fact a necessity, fail to remember that alcohol still remains a drug. It is a psychoactive depressant that is potentially extremely addicting and alters the way you think, feel, and act (Hyde and Setaro 17). From beer to liquor, alcohol comes in many different forms and flavors. It can be consumed in an even more dizzying array of methods. The fact that it comes in such a wide variety makes it even more appealing to the masses. Not to mention the fact that the media and American society today plays a major role in advertising drinking. In movies, alcohol is present is a majority of scenes that include teenage parties. Big screen college party scenes replicate the hypothetical scenario I created earlier. The portrayed, stereotyped college party consists of loud music, dancing and plenty of alcohol. Is this really how college life is? It seems that society is contributing to the American underage drinking problem by implying that drinking is a college tradition and pastime.

College is a place to have fun while at the same time, prepare for your future. But, let the truth be told, the words alcohol and college are two very closely related words. Many college students have the impression that a party isn't a party without alcohol. Thanks in part to the media; this dilemma overwhelms many inexperienced college students.

This leads to a disturbing increase in the underage drinking trend. Why is this trend becoming so popular? What can be done to lessen the image that college is a place to drink and party? And how can college students be made more aware of the risks and effects of underage drinking? These are just a few questions that go through the minds of many observers of this nationwide epidemic. Having graduated college more than a decade ago, I have personal experience with this issue, but I know that times have changed. Therefore, to help me solve these questions, I decided to interview and even shadow a student in such a tempting environment. Brandon "R." (Who will remain anonymous for the purpose of his confidentiality) is a college freshman at Florida State University. Located in Tallahassee, Florida, Florida State University has a reputation of being the number one of the top party schools in America. According to the Princeton Review’s Advantage Guide to Going to the Best310 Colleges, F.S.U. was voted the number one party school in both 1996 and 1999. In a span of six years, the college also placed in the top five party schools four separate years. With such a reputation, the answers to my questions should be easy to find. Brandon "R." is currently eighteen years old and has previously never consumed alcohol before coming to college. I asked him, "What tempted you to drink for the first time?" His answer? After several moments of silence and "Um..," he finally admitted, "Peer pressure." Perhaps the fact that it took him several seconds to come up with a reason, implies that he doesn't really know why with certainty. Or, it might mean peer pressure is very influential in college. Especially in Brandon’s situation; where being a freshman makes him vulnerable to try and fit in.

I then proceeded to ask Brandon if he could now say that he likes alcohol. Smiling, he replied that he hated Jack Daniels. When asked to elaborate on what he meant, he said, "Because it made me sick to a point where I threw up." From an objective point of view, it is obvious that he, like many other underage drinkers, do not know their "limit." That is, where to stop drinking before you have too much. Remember, too much of anything is a bad thing. Many people drink past their limit because they want to reach that state of drunkenness and euphoria where they can act on impulse and not be blamed for their actions based on their circumstance. A closer look at Brandon's situation also shows that he now enjoys alcohol. It can be inferred from his example that many first-time drinkers enjoy what they taste and wouldn't say no if offered alcohol in the future. Becoming an alcoholic seems to be a simple chain of events: taste what is available to you for the first time, then the more you are exposed to different sorts and flavors of alcohol, the more you sort out your likes and dislikes. This leads you to find your “favorite” drink, and during that process, you have consumed enough alcohol to cause enough irreparable damage to yourself. This may be extreme, but it is a broad generalization of the reality that Brandon and other college students face.

I also found out that Brandon is a pledge for a fraternity here at Florida State University. The fraternity will also remain nameless for specific reasons. I asked him if being in such an organization has had an influence on his drinking. He replied, "Most of the time I drink is when I'm with my brothers." He also admitted that there were several cases when the fraternity would gather for the sole purpose of intoxicating the pledges. Being a pledge, it is almost impossible to say no to an established brother in the fraternity. Once again, peer pressure is to blame for this example of underage drinking. What is the answer to solve this problem? It is simple; do not surround yourself in an environment that is going to tempt you to drink. Who you are with and your surroundings have a tremendous influence on your actions.

Brandon's instance brings to light the influence that Greek life has on underage drinking. Fraternities and sororities play a big role in providing the underage the opportunity to consume alcohol. Remember, twenty-one is the legal age to purchase alcohol. It is not hard to have an older member of the organization to provide the alcohol for others. I was granted permission to observe a social event between fraternities and sororities called "pomping." Specifically, it was the pomping event between Brandon’s fraternity and the sorority it was paired up with for Florida State University’s 2005 homecoming. Pomping is a pre-homecoming tradition that consists of a fraternity being paired with a sorority. Each brother is coupled up with a sister and is traditionally expected to purchase alcohol for one another. As shocking as it may seem, there has been no known case of it being stopped even though most of the participants are underage. Could it be that the police and administrators "turn their back" for the sake of preserving such a long established tradition?

Aside from the already mentioned influences, there are many subliminal-type implications to consume alcohol in college. College is supposed to be an educational institution that looks after the well being of its students. Not necessarily saying that the institutions sponsor alcohol, but the fact that it allows such implications is appalling. It is good to know that the college authorities do not allow alcohol to be sold at football games. However, it is not enough to stop there. As I was shadowing Brandon at Florida State University, I was often handed flyers while walking around campus that advertised certain sports bars and their drink specials. Even on billboards that are host to a variety of flyers, there are those that promote drink special at local restaurants and bars. To add insult to injury, I walked into a convenient store that was on campus, and sure enough, right next to the orange juice and milk; there were cases of beer on display. Sure, the beer is displayed in a separate glass room, but it is plain sight to anyone who walks by it or wants to buy an innocent gallon of milk. I understand that if you are a student over the age of 21, it is convenient to have such a place sell beer so close to campus, but the majority of college students are not of legal age. These subtle, but strong implications do have an impact on the desire to drink, legally or not. They all hint that drinking is a hobby, or even a college pastime.

I have attended several college parties myself, in hopes of documenting this trend first hand. Curiosity is what persuaded me to come; and amazement is the reaction I left with. It’s shocking to see the creativity involved in getting intoxicated. There are keg stands, where several people hold a person nearly upside down, and allow the person to drink straight from the keg. Then there is “beer pong”, a twisted version of ping-pong, in which the object of the game is to bounce a ping-pong ball into the opponent’s cups containing beer. Once a ball is made in a cup, the person must drink the beer in it. There was also another drinking game called “flip cup” going on, as well as people taking shots of liquor and chasing it down with beer. What is frightening about all of this is the fact that most of these underage drinkers are unaware they are “binge drinking.”

Bingeing refers to consuming an excessive amount of alcohol within a short period of time. According to MADD.org, more than two fifths of college students are binge drinkers (Stats and Resources). In fact, according to “Alcohol 101: An overview for teens” by Margaret O. Hyde and John F. Setaro, an estimated 2.6 million teenagers are unaware that a person can die from alcohol overdose (71). An overdose occurs when the liver, which is responsible for metabolizing the alcohol, cannot keep up with the amounts of alcohol being consumed. “Therefore, the body simply shuts down and death from heart or respiratory failure can be the result” (Hyde and Setaro 72). Scariest of all is that friends may think a person who has passed out just needs to sleep the alcohol off. In fact, this may end up with the person never waking back up. Underage drinking is not only irresponsible, but very dangerous.

Keith R. Faber, a Minnesota State University Moorhead student has an interesting outlook on underage drinking. He says, “Having once been an underage drinker, I do not feel that drinking underage is the problem, but it’s instead the irresponsibility that seems to come with it.” Having to see so many students be hospitalized from alcohol poisoning is in deed, sad.

As college students realize they are becoming adults, they are faced with new opportunities and privileges. With this new burden comes great responsibility. Being aware of the effects, and risks, both short-term and long-term is vital in their maturity. Drinking under the legal age has many risks. Behind cancer and heart disease, alcohol is the third most “preventable killer.” However, alcohol deaths typically occur at a much younger age than the first two threats (Bichler 58). From NPR’s Top Party Schools Named, according to the federal government, college drinking contributes to 1,700 deaths per year.

What exactly is this substance that college students are willing to risk their life and future for? According to Christine Bichler's "Teen Drinking," "Alcohol is a common name for a substance known as ethyl alcohol. It is created through a process called fermentation. In fermentation, grain, fruit, honey or other foods containing sugar are mixed with yeast. Yeast, a living organism, consumes the alcohol and produces carbon dioxide along with ethyl alcohol (11).

Long term effects of alcohol consumption range from cancer to high blood pressure and even to strokes (Bichler 63). Drinking alcohol at a young age can even affect the reproductive system, hindering a person’s ability to conceive a child. The consumption of alcohol not only affects the person consuming it. A child born from an alcoholic may have disabilities or be born with a handicap. It is possible that the child may be born prematurely. In an article entitled “Fetal Alcohol Syndrome,” for women that drink while pregnant, every 1 in 750 children born will show some pattern of physical, developmental, or functional problem. This is known as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. For college students, and those underage that believe they are too young to worry about such risks so far in advance, alcohol can affect you right now as we speak.

How would it sound to tell your parents after your first semester in college that you are failing? Alcohol and partying are the two biggest distractions for any student. They are the temptations that will lure you away from your goals, aspirations and your focus. According to NPR’s Top Party Schools Named in New Rankings:

Alcohol usage is involved in 40% of all academic problems and 28% of all dropouts. Students who make low averages such as D’s and F’s drink, on average, three times as much as students with A’s. Alcohol destroys brain cells and hinders people’s ability to learn, remember, plan, and make complex judgments, which is what college is all about.

The truth is, drinking underage does not make you appear more mature or older. Nor does it benefit you in any sort of way. Consuming alcohol underage, especially when you are a college freshman is the guaranteed way that you will show your real age and immaturity. Seniors in college will always be able to point out the freshman because they are the ones who will always get “wasted” and drink irresponsibly. The way to achieve maturity is the complete opposite – withstand peer pressure and stand up for what is not only right, but good for you. If anything, I hope you have learned that drinking underage is not only illegal, but foolish, ignorant and immature. Contrary to popular belief, saying no to underage drinking brings you one step closer to becoming an adult. Remember, you are not in college to graduate with a degree in alcoholism. Nor are you going to graduate with top honors for having completed the longest keg stand, or took the most shots it the least amount of time. You are in college to learn and to make a future for yourself.