

## Above the Influence

Harsh messages aim to steer students away from drugs and alcohol

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2006-12-08

### Last Drive

I knew the time would come  
 How could I tell anyone  
 It was so dumb  
 I should have been done  
 When the turn came about  
 I knew we wouldn't make it  
 Then came the blackout  
 I don't remember one bit  
 (Repeated twice)  
 Next day  
 Wake up  
 Everything is so gray  
 I pressed my luck  
 Then she came, and I knew it  
 I started to cry, they made me sit  
 Why didn't I die?  
 He's in my place tonight.

The scene is gruesome. A bloody and unconscious teen is wheeled into a hospital emergency room by two paramedics. A team of doctors and nurses take over, quickly cutting away the boy's clothing and working to clear his airway. In a similar drama unfolding nearby, a teen girl is stripped naked. A large quantity of orange bile is pumped from her stomach and a tube is inserted up her urethra to empty her bladder. Later the boy is pronounced dead. With a tag attached to his toe, he is wrapped in a sheet and transported to the morgue. Then a nurse calls his parents and asks them to come to the hospital. Shocking, disturbing and not well-suited for the uneasy, these incidents are played out in full color in the film *Dying High: Teens in the ER*. The video was screened on Monday for the full student body at Greely High. The viewing was part of a drug and alcohol awareness day at the school titled *Above the Influence*. After watching the film, sophomores Ben Shumaker and Kirsten Russell performed an original song titled *Last Drive*, which they wrote after watching the video in health class. The song is written from the perspective of a student who drives drunk, crashes the car and kills a friend. Russell described the film as *iscary and gross and you don't want it to happen to you*, and Shumaker said *it's a wake-up call*. Both students say they don't drink and haven't been in a drunk driving situation. *I've made plenty of mistakes in the past*, Russell told the assembly. *Everyone makes mistakes. Can you imagine handling the grief of killing a loved one?* Greely health science teacher Denise Allen, who organized the awareness day with her students, said concrete information is more persuasive than *just say no* messages when it comes to reaching teens. *We talk about the teen brain* in health class, Allen said. *And we talk about how using drugs alters the development of the adult brain ... I talk a*

lot about the fact that drug culture doesn't have quality control. You don't know if that marijuana has been laced with something or what's in that ecstasy pill.

Allen said she is able to bring her experiences as an EMS provider into her classes by talking to her students about what happens when a student overdoses on heroin or passes out from drinking to excess. She said the video is the closest I could get to being in the back of the ambulance or in the trauma room.

Yarmouth High substance abuse counselor Jill Frame said different messages work for different students. *Research has shown that for those students who aren't using on a regular basis, prevention education works*, Frame said. *Students who are using on a consistent basis, of which we have many, many who do, that prevention piece is not effective. It's more minimizing risks*. Frame said it is important for parents and other adults to acknowledge that drug and alcohol use is taking place within the teen community. *In a lot of communities there's often a misconception as to how many students are using, and in Yarmouth we have a lot of students who are using quite a bit*, Frame said. When it comes to parental attitudes about drinking and drug use, Frame has found parents tend to fall into one of three camps. There are those parents who say absolutely no drinking, anywhere, ever. Then there are those who recognize that substance use is a reality for teens, but who prohibit it in their homes and ask their teens to call should they find themselves without a sober ride home. The third camp is populated by parents who allow their teens to drink at home, reasoning the young people will be safer if supervised. *Some parents are just exhausted by having older siblings*, Frame said. *They say, 'I set boundaries and they didn't listen anyway.'* Frame's response to parents who have this philosophy is that providing alcohol to minors, or a place for them to consume it, is against the law. Greely, like all local high schools, has struggled with drug and alcohol usage among its students. Last year, a dance was canceled due to student drinking and a drinking incident prior to the 2005 prom, coupled with the on-going dance issues, led administrators to have a breathalyzer test at the ready for the 2006 prom. In 2005, the results of a Maine Youth Drug and Alcohol Use Survey revealed that 45 percent of Greely seniors had used alcohol during the 30-days prior to taking the survey. The same survey, released this August, showed that 51 percent of seniors in Cumberland County drank alcohol in the 30-day period before the survey, 31 percent used marijuana, 22 percent smoked cigarettes and 20 percent abused prescription drugs. *I think it goes on a lot here*, Russell said. *There are a lot of parties. You always hear about people being suspended*. Russell said she can understand the urges that lead students to drink. *If all your friends are doing something*, she said, *you don't want to be left out*. Statistics show that drug and alcohol usage rises as students progress through high

school. Trying to combat this use is an ongoing struggle for teachers, parents and teens. "Alcohol is definitely top on the list because it is accessible and easy to get by teens," said Robin Haley, substance abuse prevention coordinator for Falmouth High. "You'll hear students say they use to chill out and relax," Haley said. "A lot of it is peer influence. You hear they go to a party not intending to drink, and then they fall into it because others are doing it. If they didn't get caught, it becomes easier." Teens using drugs or alcohol to relieve stress is a common occurrence, according to Frame. "These days more than ever before there is a high level of stress (for high school students)," Frame said. "In a community like Yarmouth that has high standards, which very well they should, there is a high amount of stress." Being coached in more healthful ways of relaxing can be useful to students who turn to drugs as a stress reliever. Common techniques include watching a funny movie, playing music, dancing, writing about stressors in a journal or just talking with friends. "Hopefully, you're planting the seeds so when they're in those situations, they remember it," said Allen, the Greely health science teacher. "You know you're not reaching everyone. But if you reach one person you know you're doing your job." What are your thoughts on drug and alcohol use in the local high schools? Voice them at [myMaineToday.com](http://myMaineToday.com).

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