

**Drinking** from 1A

Nicole had her first drink with in elementary school.

"Rum and coke," she said. "It was a family reunion. My great grandpa handed it to me, saying, 'Hey do you want this?'" This type of introduction to

alcohol is fairly typical, according to Lane County Community Health Analyst Emily Buff Bear, who helped form the Healthy Directions initiative in Florence.

"Unlike a more urban area, like Eugene, where the alcohol is provided by friends who are 21, we don't have many people of that age group in Florence," she said. "They usually move away. The data shows us that teens get alcohol from an adult."

For a few of the teenagers of the Siuslaw region, their introduction to alcohol was also made by family members.

Six local teens were interviewed for this article. Four had tried drinking, but only two considered themselves "drinkers." Of those, only one had alcohol within the last month.

Wine was a common introduction for many of the teens.

One joked, "My first time having alcohol was on accident. I was about 10 and I thought it was my glass of milk. Unfortunately, it was not."

However, their first real taste of alcohol came from a family member.

"It was a sip of wine when my aunt asked me if I wanted to try it," they said. "I was about 16 or 17."

Another teen, who chooses not to drink, said, "The kids who have older siblings and friends who do that kind of thing can get it."

Another stated, "I think that depends on whether anyone in their house drinks, because if they don't have alcohol in their house, then probably not. It's not like you can just go to the store and they'll say, 'Oh hey, I know you're giving this to your family, so I'll sell it to you.' You still get carded here."

Healthy Directions knows that family members sometimes give youth alcohol, which is why the coalition focuses mainly on adults in its efforts.

"It's coming from adults who've decided that youth are going to drink," Buff Bear said. "Parents have told Healthy Directions that they're providing a safe place for a kid to drink."

As to why youth decide to drink or not, the reasons varied, as did the attitudes towards those who made different choices.

"Common sense," said one youth who opted not to drink.

"I've never had a thirst for it. I know alcoholism runs in my family on both sides, so I know that there is a chance for me to get hooked on it. That's why I mostly stay away from it."

Another said, "The fact that it inebriates people so they aren't themselves, that just freaks me out."

Those who didn't drink often held a lower opinion of those who did.

One stated, "They should be like, 'I'm worth more than this, I shouldn't be damaging my body this way.' I don't think any lower of anyone for making mistakes, but I don't think it's a very good thing to do at the same time."

Others were more blunt about their peers: "I often do think lower of them, unfortunately. Humans often judge too quickly, but that is our nature. I don't know what caused them to start drinking, but I do hope they find help."

"Well, I think it reflects that they don't care about laws, or their health," another said. "They don't really respect themselves. It's damaging their body at a really young age, so it just shows that they don't care about their well being. They probably don't think they have a future."

However, those who drank semi-regularly had a higher opinion of those who didn't.

One said, "Good for them honestly. Keep doing what you're doing, because drinking gets you nowhere but down the wrong road."

"I think it's fine if they want to live different lives than other people do. Whatever you wanna do is what you want to do."

As to why they began drinking, both listed friends.

One of them said, "I just wanted to try it, I guess. I tried it the summer after sophomore year. I have a friend who had it. I think it's a normal thing. It can be a big deal, causing a lot of bad things to happen, but you can't really stop it."

The other said, "A couple friends really pushed me to it, so I tried it. They brought it over. I'd say it's normal for teens to experiment with alcohol before they are 21."

Normal was a word repeated throughout the conversations.

"I feel like it is such a big issue that it's become normal," one said. "People just expect kids to do it. People just assume those kids do it because most of them do."

Youth drinking is "Americana." In this year's upcoming Rods 'n' Rhodies festival, the theme is "American Graffiti," based on George Lucas' influential 1973 high school film.

One of the most memorable scenes in the film involves underage Charles Martin Smith as he attempts to slyly buy liquor at a convenience store.

"I'll have a Three Musketeers, a ball point pen, one of those combs, a pint of Old Harper and some beef jerky," Smith said, hoping the cashier wouldn't think the pint of whiskey was out of the ordinary.

Of course, the cashier does and Smith is turned away.

Teens attempting to get alcohol, and the glorious moment they finally obtain it, is a constant theme throughout films.

The list is limitless: "Fast Times at Ridgemont High," "Dazed and Confused," "American Pie," "Teen Wolf," "Superbad," etc. Even Harry Potter and his friends enjoy the "slightly alcoholic" wizarding beverage Butterbeer.

"I think it is portrayed as normal in movies, but it is an issue," said one teen.

"I'd say our culture has really glorified it," Buff Bear stated. "It feels like everybody is drinking."

The point is clear: Teens want to drink, they will obtain alcohol and it's just normal and fun.

While entertainment may play a role in normalizing youth drinking, Buff Bear believes advertising is also a major factor.

"If a teen sees a lot of advertising and they see a lot of bars and they see adults drinking, then it normalizes it. It can change the behavior for our youth. And youth like to think that they're adults; they like to do adult things. And if they see things that they think is normal adult behavior, then they're going to do that."

The majority of restaurants in Old Town Florence have prominent bars in them; carefully curated and lit bottles of fine liquors stacked in elegant areas that sometimes act as the centerpiece of an establishment.

"I wish that bars didn't seem like the cool place to be," Nicole said. "Not all restaurants are kid friendly."

Abby's Pizza is Florence's perennial youth destination. It hosts countless graduation and birthday parties. Video games line the walls, including a claw machine game that has Blu-rays of Disney Classics for prizes.

Behind the tall pickup counter rests two large beer steins with various taps protruding from them. Prices and brands are prominently displayed around them, along with warnings against selling to minors.

Healthy Directions will be honoring Abby's for its work in preventing underage drinking by not

selling to minors, but as far as the cultural aspects of prominent alcohol consumption in a family atmosphere, Abby's General Manager Kristi Robinson had mixed feelings.

Asked if the advertisements for beer in Abby's has the ability to influence a child into drinking, Robinson stated, "I don't think they're advertising to kids, just what their product is. I don't think if they see something in a store window they'll say, 'Oh, I'm going to go buy that.'"

"Obviously they can't buy it," Robinson continued. "By the time they're old enough to understand what it is, they should know that they're not supposed to do it, if they're taught that way."

Robinson confesses she doesn't really drink, so normalization hasn't crossed her mind much. She's told her kids not to drink, and she does believe that the media doesn't do enough to present the harmful effects of alcohol in any meaningful way.

But as to Abby's role in promoting alcohol?

"I don't know," she said. "The adults can have a beer when the kids are having a party, but they're not overindulging. I don't think there's anything wrong with it. It is kind of normal. There's so many people who believe beer and pizza go together. But if they're adults and they have a driver, they're responsible adults who have a right. I don't know if we normalize it. I never really thought of it that way."

While it's easy to condemn youth who drink, it's more difficult for adults to grasp their role in how alcohol is presented to youth. Should adults be forever vigilant in how they drink in public, hyper-aware of children that may be in the vicinity?

Nicole, after all of her issues with alcohol, still wishes that children had a more nuanced view of the discussion.


"I think children seeing parents drink in moderation is very important, because drinking is not a bad thing," she said. "I think parents should drink without the kids judging them. It is 'normalizing' it. When my son sees someone drinking, he asks me about it. I told him when he's an adult, he can make that choice. Some adults can drink, some adults shouldn't drink."

While the discussion revolving around normalization will last for years to come, there are current ways to stem youth drinking within the current cultural framework.

In Wednesday's issue, find out how establishments like Healthy Directions and Abby's Pizza are working to do just that.

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