

November 14, 2005

Last week's tragic death, by heroin overdose, of an 18-year-old woman in our community (Conestoga High School, '05) was heartbreaking. Before we shake our heads and move on to this week's news, let's take a minute to face facts and search our souls.

Young people, right here in Easttown and Tredyffrin townships, have alcohol, tobacco, and other drug problems. Consider this evidence:

1. Tredyffrin-Easttown Community Youth Survey. Our young people (grades 6,8,10 and 12) report that they are drinking and using drugs in greater numbers than their peers in Chester County, across the state and around the nation.
2. Public records of police actions. In a one-year period (July 1 '04-June 30, '05), 171 youth in Tredyffrin and Easttown (under the age of 21) were arrested or cited for alcohol or other drug offenses. When I read the public records, I found, sadly, that I recognized name after name. One tragic case involved a promising Conestoga athlete, class of '04, who today is serving out a felony conviction. The summer after graduation, he left a party where he had been drinking, borrowed a friend's car and crashed it into a train underpass, causing serious injury to his 16-year-old passenger. Needless to say, the damage to his own future has been enormous.
3. Athletic team dismissals. In the last few years, both girls and boys have been removed from teams or disqualified from competition for drug use. Your own teenage athlete may be drug-free, but may be depending on a stoned or drunk teammate for safety and success on the field.

This problem is REAL. This problem is OURS. This is NOT a school problem. It is a problem in **our families** and in **our community**. We cannot afford to look the other way any longer, shrugging off any responsibility because "kids will be kids" and "at least it wasn't my kid."

Please, look within yourself. Each of us bears some responsibility here. Do you ignore the problem or do you, in any way, contribute to it? Do you, for

example, look the other way when teens use drugs or alcohol because you're unwilling to get involved, or have given up and are afraid to stand up to your own children? Do you allow teens to drink in your own home, telling yourself it's a safer environment and teens will drink anyway? Do you neglect to call parents to make sure that they will be home during a party and that no alcohol will be consumed? Do you model responsible behavior and attitudes toward drinking for your children?

If you find that you can own part of the community problem, I urge you to begin owning the solution. If that involves making personal changes, it will take tremendous courage, courage that will be recognized by those close to you and appreciated by the larger community.

If you are uncertain where to begin, here are two things you can do today.

First, familiarize yourself with the problem. Visit www.ARCHcares.org. ARCH (Area Residents Caring and Helping) is a coalition of Tredyffrin and Easttown parents, school administrators, teachers, local police, the Upper Main Line YMCA and Paoli Hospital committed to helping our youth make healthy choices and stay drug- and alcohol-free. Read about these issues in our community and current initiatives to combat them. Make a personal commitment to confront anyone you know who looks the other way when our young people are drinking and using.

Second, download the ARCH party guidelines contract (also at www.ARCHcares.org) and make time to discuss it with your family. Sign it and join the network of local families who are committed to helping keep kids drug-free. Make a family commitment to abide by it. (And if you would like to join ARCH, we would be thrilled to have you!)

Help us win the battle against a preventable community problem. Our young people need our love and our help. We must do everything we can to prevent them from making destructive choices. Their very lives may depend on it. Dig deep and make a personal commitment to change any behaviors that may be contributing to the problem. You will be giving all of us – your neighbors, friends, the next generation – a significant gift. And for that, in advance, we thank you.

Ellen Moeller, Valley Forge
ARCH Co-Chair