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Sparkman High students hear 'Under Age, Under Arrest' Message: 'Make the right choice'

By Eddie Lard

HARVEST, Ala. – Making the right choice about using alcohol was the message students at Sparkman High School heard over and over Friday at a program sponsored by the Alabama Alcoholic Beverage Control Board. And the right choice is to say no to alcohol, especially with prom season around the corner, ABC Board officials and other speakers told the students.

“The hardest part for me is having to call that parent, that a lot of times I know, and saying (her child) is going to jail because he didn’t make the right choice,” Assistant Principal Tandy Shumate said. “You are not just hurting yourself. You are hurting your parents, too.”

Good decision-making applies to parents as well as students. It is against the law for anyone under the age 21 to possess, consume or buy alcohol, ABC Board Administrator Mac Gipson pointed out. But some parents, he said, don’t realize it’s also against the law for adults to provide alcohol to minors.

“I’ve had parents tell me, ‘After the prom, they are coming over to my house, and I’m going to keep the keys.’ And they serve the children alcohol,” Gipson said. “That person can go to jail.”

Friday’s program was part of ABC Board’s new “Under Age, Under Arrest” initiative targeting underage and binge drinking. The event in the Sparkman High gym was the first school program in North Alabama for the statewide initiative and highlighted the dangers and the social and legal costs of these forms of irresponsible drinking.

Joining Gipson at Sparkman were state Rep. Phil Williams, R-Huntsville; Madison County Sheriff Blake Dorning; and Dr. Joe Godfrey, executive director of the Alabama Citizens Action Program and its American Character Builders education program; and Dean Argo, government relations manager for the ABC Board; and Sheriff Deputy Jonas Wilson.

According to national student surveys:

- More than 26 percent of people age 12-20 reported consuming alcohol within the past month.
- By age 15, half of teens have had at least one drink.
- By age 18, more than 70 percent of teens have had at least one drink.

Nationwide, about 5,000 people under the age of 21 die each year from alcohol-related car crashes, homicides, suicides, alcohol poisoning and other injuries.

The program included a video produced for Mothers Against Drunk Driving that recounted the hardships of a man who lost his wife and three children to an accident caused by a drunk-driving teenager. Williams, a former high school wrestler, said the video reminded him of what happened to a former wrestling teammate.

“His name was Matthew, and we called him Matt,” Williams said. “He was awesome. He was the guy who was so good looking, when he walked pass, the girls would just break out in a hot sweat.

“He was an incredibly talented guy, and he was very strong. He had a small sports car, and he could lift the back of it.”

But one day, Williams said, Matt went out drinking with friends at a club, and on the way home, he flipped his car. “He ended up with some real serious brain damage. Matt went from being the guy who was going to literally change the world to not really being able to walk very well. And he couldn’t talk any more.”

Matt died, homeless, and about three years after the accident, Williams said.

“We have so many freedoms,” the lawmaker told the Sparkman students. “But with freedom comes responsibility. With the freedoms you have, please make good choices.”

In Alabama, State Troopers report that 62 people were killed and more than 1,000 injured between 2010 and 2012 in car crashes caused by underage drinkers.

“The reason we are taking it to high school is we know you are mature enough to understand the dangers associated with irresponsible behavior, in this case, drinking alcohol,” Argo told the students.

Studies show that young people who begin drinking in their teen years are six times more likely to become problem drinkers or alcohol dependent.

Godfrey’s American Character Builders education program urges complete abstinence from alcohol.

“I’m not going to just talk about drinking in moderation or not drinking until you are old enough,” he told the students. “My admonition to you is don’t drink at all – ever.”

Godfrey said alcohol is a mind-altering, addictive drug that kills between 75,000 and 80,000 people each year. It also costs Americans \$223 billion a year to clean up all the problems caused by alcohol abuse, he said. “You will never become addicted if you don’t take the first drink.”

ABC Board officials said the goal is to make the “Under Age, Under Arrest” slogan as synonymous with underage drinking as the “Click it or Ticket” campaign is with wearing seatbelts.

The ABC Board is partnering with anti-drinking organizations such as MADD, SADD and ALCAP’s American Character Builders to help schools get the message to students and parents alike about the dangers of and penalties for underage drinking. In addition, the ABC Board is partnering with other groups, organizations and institutions throughout the state. These include religious organizations, health agencies, substance-abuse treatment providers, law enforcement, children’s groups, colleges and businesses.

For more information about “Under Age, Under Arrest,” go online to www.underage-underarrest.com.

The Alabama Alcoholic Beverage Control Board controls alcoholic beverages through distribution, licensing and enforcement as well as education.