

## Students learn dangers of drinking, sign prom promise

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by Briana Webster

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CURRY — Appearing a little unsteady, seniors at Curry High School were seeing double Thursday morning as each one participated in activities where students received a first-hand experience of what it's like to operate under the influence of drugs and alcohol.

Tina Aaron of the Walker County Community in Action Coalition teamed up with professionals from the Northwest Alabama Mental Health Center, school faculty and staff and a local pastor in an effort to curb underage drinking and driving among teens in the county.

“We are conducting a prom promise event where students are signing their pledge cards, signing the banner, and then they're going to go through activities wearing the intoxication goggles to see how they react to a simulation of how they would be if they had been drinking,” Aaron said. “They also got a little instruction on Alabama law regarding underage drinking and how the brain works on alcohol.”

Over the years different schools throughout the United States have participated in prom promise events, such as the one held at Curry Thursday. Some high schools take it to another level and bring in wrecked cars and emergency air evac helicopters to make a mock vehicle accident seem more realistic to teenagers.

“We're doing this to try to encourage them to not drink and drive. We want them to have a good time. Prom is a rite of passage for seniors. We want them to enjoy themselves, but we want them to be able to remember it,” Aaron said. “... We want them to be aware of the law and about the consequences, the physical consequences, which is more important than anything. We want them to make it through and survive.”

April Dunn and Connie Barton, two NWAMHC prevention specialists, have worked with several schools and have many years of experience in dealing with prevention. The ladies were on hand Thursday speaking with students about the importance of not drinking and driving and allowing the students to take part in the activities.

“We're talking to them about the dangers of underage drinking, and that's one of the activities that sometimes goes along with prom. We're trying to warn them about it and get them to make some good decisions tomorrow night when they head out,” Dunn said. “... It is a problem in the high schools and in some of the middle schools with underage drinking, and I don't think they realize the dangers of it. They always think that it's not going to happen to them, so we're just out here trying to warn them of it and teach them the consequences to using alcohol and other drugs.”

Students donned the so-called “drunk” goggles and tried to ring a bucket with a ball.

Then, students were asked to pour a glass of water, carry it on a tray and try to walk a straight line without spilling the water while wearing the goggles. A majority of students had trouble with both activities, which caused an eruption of laughter among their peers.

“I think it’s beneficial because a lot of kids when you go out on prom night, they’re dancing and having fun, but when you go to a prom party you’re going to be surrounded by alcohol. You’re going to want to drink,” said senior Daniel Hunter. “This right here, just putting those goggles on and walking is going to let you know you’re not going to be OK to drive. ... I think this is going to help out a lot, though. Maybe it’ll save some lives; hopefully, it’ll keep everybody safe.”

Kelli Porter, who is the sponsor of the Curry SADD Club (Students Against Destructive Decisions), said events like Thursday’s gives students information that they may not have had before and gives them an alternative to do other things instead of drink alcohol. She said the club’s mission is to “combat anything destructive, not just alcohol, not just drugs, not just sex but also cutting, or bulimia, anorexia, anything that would be destructive to the person’s social, mental or physical well-being, we try to go against that.”

The guest speaker for the day was Anthony Sellers, pastor of Awakening Life Church in Curry. He provided students with statistics on what boys and girls think the opposite sex does in preparing for prom, such as how much a girl spends on her dress or the cost of a limousine rental. Sellers also shared examples, jokes and a life experience of how he lost his brother to a drunk driver.

“I know that this is a big weekend. This is an exciting weekend, but one thing to keep in mind is that prom is one day. It’s just one evening,” Sellers said. “... What I want to get through your mind today, and I’m sure many people have already tried and worked on getting this through your mind, is all of that can be changed in one choice. All of that can change in one night.

“According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, 48 teenagers are killed and 5,202 are injured in a vehicle accident on a typical prom weekend, and most of those are alcohol related,” he continued. “... I could stand up here and tell you to cherish your life, cherish your life enough that you don’t need to drink and drive on this one night, this one big party or any time. I could stand up here and tell you that your life is important, but what I’m standing up here telling you is that other peoples’ lives are important too.”

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