

Death highlights teen-drinking issue

350
■ Desire to please kids may lead parents to condone or facilitate alcohol consumption, counselor says

By Jonathan Morales
STAFF WRITER

When Roni Melmed was raising three children in Lafayette, she knew that just because her house was a "no-drinking zone" didn't mean her kids weren't consuming alcohol elsewhere in town.

"We knew that they were drinking at people's houses. I shouldn't say we *knew* that, but we weren't naive," she said.

While teenagers consuming alcohol is nothing new, nor is it confined to one community, the May death of a 16-year-old at a party in Orinda where police say alcohol was being consumed has brought renewed attention to the issue.

And in the small communities of Orinda, Lafayette and Moraga, many say teen drinking — and parents' acceptance of it — is all too common.

Experts say there is a societal acceptance of drinking that leads teens to believe it's OK for them to drink as well — a problem that seems to

"(Parents) think it's a rite of passage."

— Roni Melmed, Lafayette parent

affect affluent communities more seriously than others, according to a state Healthy Kids Survey conducted in 2007.

"It's integrated into the culture, and so it's totally accepted by the parent/adult community, and so the kids just pick it up," said Ralph Cantor, coordinator of drug, alcohol and violence prevention at the Alameda County Office of Education.

He said that while cigarette tax money funneled into anti-tobacco education has helped dramatically reduce the number of kids who smoke, there has been no similar effort aimed at alcohol awareness. Ellen Peterson worked as a peer counselor at Acalanes High School in Lafayette, and said students there spoke openly of drinking and partying. After she retired in 1995, she created a drug and alcohol task force for Lafayette, Moraga and Orinda.

She said while some parents are unaware their teens may be consuming alcohol, others condone underage drinking, host parties and even drink with their kids.

"I think a lot of parents think it's part of being friends

with their kids, and they're worried that their kids won't like them if they're not sort of peers," Peterson said.

It's something Melmed also observed when her kids were growing up.

"(Parents) think it's a rite of passage," she said. "That it's going to happen, we can't be naive to it, and as long as they don't drink and drive, they're kind of OK with that."

Orinda police Chief William French said the department responds to parties often, and that he is well aware some parents provide alcohol to minors. But regardless of how parents feel about the issue, he added, the law is the law.

"It's not law enforcement's responsibility to raise kids in the community," he said. "It's my responsibility when we are called to the scene or when we discover that minors are drinking to take appropriate action."

For parents or others hosting parties in Orinda, appropriate action could lead to a fine or jail time under an "unruly party" ordinance.

That ordinance was revised, and stiffer penalties

put into place, partly in response to the deaths of two teenagers in separate traffic accidents in Moraga in 2007. Alcohol was involved in both incidents.

Cantor said many teens are not getting a clear message from parents that underage drinking is not OK.

"My real question that I pose to parents and everybody else is, why do kids have to drink? Where did that come from that kids have to drink?" he said.

Kim Gallagher, with the nonprofit San Ramon Valley Community Against Substance Abuse, works toward countering the perception that drinking is the norm. CASA runs a program called Youth to Youth, in which drug- and alcohol-free teens mentor younger kids.

"It's really kind of based on a reverse peer pressure type of model," Gallagher said. If hanging out kids who drink sway behavior, she said, so can spending time with those who don't.

"I think that the message of our group is regardless of what you see on TV and see at the movies and hear about in the paper, that not everybody is using drugs and drinking alcohol," Gallagher said. "It feels that way, but it's just not true."

Oakland, CA
(Alameda Co.)
Oakland Tribune
(Cir. D. 152,739)
(Cir. S. 156,163)

JUN - 2 2009

Allen's P. C. B. Est. 1888