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YOUR MESSENGER FOR THE ARKANSAS RIVER VALLEY

Teens Tackle Underage Drinking

Local students inform others about the dangers of alcohol consumption

By Cara Bailey

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Atkins High School 12th-grader Clay Wylia knows what's happening at his school, from student plays on Tuesday to who's drinking alcohol on Friday. Wylia is informed about the use of alcohol among his classmates, but isn't planning to take a sip of beer any time soon. That's because Wylia knows the health risks caused by underage drinking.

But Wylia is a minority among Pope County teenagers, considering 67 percent of Pope County 12th-graders reported using alcohol at least once in their lives, according to statistics gathered by the River Valley Prevention Coalition. On average, Pope County teenagers start drinking at 12. At age 14, many Pope County teenagers begin to consume alcohol on a regular basis. The Underage Drinking Committee of the coalition wants to change teenagers' actions by informing them about underage drinking with the help from classmates and grants such as those from the All State Foundation and the Strategic Prevention Framework State Incentive Grant (SPF SIG).

"We do this because we want to make it better," Wylia, who is part of the effort, said. "The use of alcohol will never change if we don't do it. So we push ourselves, hoping our work will materialize a difference."

Wylia, along with Atkins High School (AHS) and the committee, is surveying classmates to find out why AHS students drink. Then, they will implement a plan to educate students about the mental and physical dangers of underage drinking.

Alcohol can damage organs and increase risks of life-threatening

diseases like cancer, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and National Clearing House for Alcohol and Drug Information's (NCADI) Web site. Underage drinking can result in poor judgment, memory lapses, blackouts and more.

The Underage Drinking Prevention Committee was formed under the River Valley Prevention Coalition with Angela White serving as its coordinator. Area high school students embody the group's Pope County Teen Leadership School Coalitions.

For White, the most shocking statistic was that many high school students reported receiving alcohol from a family member or relative's refrigerator, she said. Before the study, she said she believed students were obtaining alcohol from friends more than 21 years old.

White said 500 parents have signed Safe Home Pledges, which the committee offers to parents who pledge to inform children about the health risks of underage drinking, including death and injury in car crashes. Parents also pledge not to host parties with alcohol or allow drunk students to enter alcohol-free parties.

One teenager dies every 15 minutes as a result of driving while intoxicated, she said.

"We want to bridge the gap," White said. "We want Pope and Yell counties to work together because both counties' kids and families intermesh."

During the recent Pope County Youth Celebration, speaker Paul Vitale spoke about inspiring the community to prevent the use of drugs and alcohol.

"These students have the capacity to impact their peers, parents and

community at large with their efforts to prevent underage drinking," stated Vitale. "It's a privilege to be a part of recognizing their leadership in Pope County."

AHS 11th-grader Abbi Duvall said she will join the coalition since students respond better to peer role models than to adults' advice.

"Underage drinking has been this way for a long time," Duvall said. "We need a change."

Duvall said she's never felt a need to drink since it's something that could harm her body.

"We need to show them the ugly side of alcohol," Duvall said. "Advertisements don't show that."

Russellville School District board member Margie Smith said creating high school students as leaders is the best way to reach students. A mid-winter student leadership summit took place in February for coalition student members in Russellville, Atkins, Dover and Pottsville high schools to present their information and to learn how to help make their schools a safer and more enjoyable place by preventing texting while driving, alcohol use, drug use and more.

Russellville High School 10th-grader Madisun White joined the drinking prevention committee after Christmas, she said. She's also participated with the River Valley Prevention Coalition before since her mom, Angela White, is the Underage Drinking Prevention Committee coordinator.

"Teenagers impact peers," Madisun White said. "When parents talk to teenagers, (teens) don't listen. Sometimes they just automatically put up a wall."

Wylia emphasized communication.

"I try to make a difference by letting peers know what they are doing," Wylia said. "I just don't understand why students want to drink."