

The Amherst Lions Club will hold a garage sale from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Saturday, May 5 at Trinity United Methodist Church at 711 Niagara Falls Blvd. Proceeds will go to help the blind and people with other handicaps. Call 694-5814.

Parents, now it's your turn

Amherst Task Force looks to educate parents on underage drinking

by ELIZABETH TAUFA
Reporter

Graduations and proms make for some of the most memorable events in the lives of young people, but the celebrations are too often marred by accidents — the result of underage drinking.

This year, the Amherst Task Force has joined others in the community to address a new aspect of the problem: the parents. "Years ago, if alcohol was found at an underage party, officers would confiscate it and pour it out in front of the kids," said John Moslow, chief of the Amherst Police Department. "Now we have a zero-tolerance policy."

If police find a group of underage individuals with alcohol, the alcohol is confiscated for evidence and the parents of the young people are notified by letter.

But what about the parties where alcohol and the parents are present?

"If parents are found to be hosts of one of these parties, they can be charged with child endangerment," Moslow said. "The parents are also liable if the child leaves their house and has a car accident."

On graduation or prom nights, some well-meaning parents purchase limos or hotel rooms for their sons or daughters so that they will not be driving under the influence of alcohol.

"These parents are nice people, but they're naive when it comes to the dangers of alcohol," said Sally Yageric, parent program coordinator for the Erie County Council for the Prevention of Alcohol and Substance Abuse. "Kids drinking today is much different than it used to be."

The "different drinking" that Yageric is referring to is binge



*Source: Survey of Alcohol, Tobacco and Drug Use Among Ninth Grade Students, 2004-2005 Department of Health Behavior, Division of Cancer Prevention and Population Sciences Roswell Park Cancer Institute

Look for more Amherst Task Force ads like this during the next few weeks in The Amherst Bee. The ads will contain additional statistics on underage drinking.

drinking, which is becoming a problem in the school systems, even involving students bringing alcohol to school.

"There are parties every weekend where these kids are binge drinking," said Seema Maheshwari, a parent representative of the Amherst Task force. She noted that the problems exist everywhere, not just at a specific school or in a specific area, but all through America.

Detective Sgt. Mike Torrillo of the Amherst Police Department noted that underage drinking also puts the rest of the community at risk.

"It takes considerable police force to break up these parties," he said. "And when the kids get angry that their party has been broken up, they tend to cause more problems and that results

in additional calls."

Moslow noted that underage drinking also results in hospitalization from both accidents and overindulgence.

"Most teenagers are not experienced in drinking, and they have too much," he said.

"I don't take satisfaction in making this prediction, but I predict some high school student will be seriously injured or killed during the month of May as a result of alcohol use," Moslow continued, noting that this has been a recurring theme throughout the years.

"The police are one part of the solution," Moslow said. "The other part is the parents at home."

The Amherst Task Force has begun an initiative to get parents more involved in combating the underage drinking problem in the community — a problem that is prevalent in all communities across America.

Part of that initiative is the

SafeHomes pledge, a signed document for parents to promise to provide a drug- and alcohol-free home for their children and their children's friends, as well as to provide supervision when those young people are present.

The SafeHomes pledge also involves communication between parents to ensure that drugs and alcohol are not being made available.

Another aspect of the initiative is a video titled "Now It's Your Turn," which shows facts about, and examples of, troubling behavior in Amherst's youth.

The video asks parents and community members to think about ways to address the problem of underage drinking.

The task force is currently in search of groups who would be interested in viewing the video and participating in a discussion on how to effectively address this issue.

Presentations can be set up by calling Anne Rohrer, coordinator of the Amherst Task Force Coalition, at 631-7215.

Government officials have also joined the fight against underage drinking.

Assemblyman Jim Hayes, R-Amherst, and Sen. Mary Lou Rath, R-C-I Williamsville, have both contributed \$2,500 to the campaign.

"Underage drinking is dangerous behavior that threatens young people and families in our community," Hayes said. "I am pleased to continue my efforts to win important state funding grants to help educate Amherst teens about this danger and to help promote safe and responsible behavior."

"As a member of both the state Health Committee and the Social Services, Children and Families Committee, I understand how important it is to combat youth underage drinking," Rath said. "I am very proud to have been able to assist the Amherst Task Force for Healthy Community with their Healthy Youth Underage Drinking Campaign."

Not just another party

To combat the problems of underage drinking after the prom, parents at some area high schools have found an alternative to private parties that are both safe and fun for the students.

The Williamsville East Post Prom is held from midnight to 4 a.m. at the Amherst Pepsi Center and offers games, skating, dancing, food and a general carnival atmosphere, including door prizes for every student.

"We try to give away things that the kids really want," said Effie Meyer, a co-chair of the post-prom event, noting that last year's prizes included laptops for some lucky students.

"By the time 4 o'clock rolls around, they're usually too tired to go out and do anything else," she added, noting that some parents will host breakfasts for the students the next day.

The event costs around \$20,000 and is paid for through the fundraising efforts of the post-prom committee, which throughout the year holds barbecues, ice cream socials and raffles to raise money for the event. Money is also donated by parents of East students.

"The local small businesses have been very generous," Meyer said. "We haven't been very lucky with the larger corporations because I think they see it as just another party to give to kids who don't need one."

But, according to Meyer, it's much more than that.

"Statistics show that prom night is one of the most dangerous nights for kids to be out on the road," she said. "We're providing a safe place that kids can come to after the prom, but we have to make it fun, too."

Meyer noted that the peer-pressure aspect of postprom celebrations is also no longer an issue with the PTSA-sponsored post-prom because of the turnout the event experiences.

"We have close to 78 percent of the senior class attend and 95 percent of everyone who went to the prom," she said. "If everyone is here, there's no pressure to go anywhere else."

Now it's your turn...

The Amherst Task Force offers parents the following steps toward ensuring that their children remain drug- and alcohol-free:

- Maintain an open dialogue with your child. Listen and learn what your child thinks and feels.
- Communicate clear and consistent messages. Have a clear "no use of alcohol or drugs for minors" family rule and enforce it.
- Support your child's positive activities. Be an active participant in your child's world.
- Get to know your child's current friends and their families.
- Role-play with your child at home regarding situations that will come up when alcohol and other drugs are available or offered. Give your child practice in saying "No thanks" and the plan and means to leave.
- Be healthy in your own use of alcohol and medication.
- Inventory the alcohol in your home and garage. Limit the amount and access.
- Don't close your eyes to a problem your child may have. Seek help.
- Talk with other parents of your concerns about their child's behaviors and activities.
- Show affection to your child at every age.