

Ellen Peterson:

Sobering Thoughts to Keep Parents on Their Toes

By Sophie Braccini



Ellen Peterson

Photo Sophie Braccini

“The typical American teenager will see 100,000 beer commercials before the age of 18, more than for sneakers, gum and jeans combined.” This was Ellen Peterson’s last sobering thought, as featured in a recent edition of her newsletter. The December 1st issue was labeled #314. For the past twelve years Peterson, a DVC Psychology teacher, has sent a bi-weekly letter to more than a thousand addresses (both virtual and hard mail), about alcohol and drug use in the Acalanes School District.

Peterson was teaching a “Peer Counseling” class at Acalanes High School in the nineties. She observed first-hand the surge in drug and alcohol use. When the media came on campus to report on the rising rate of substance abuse in suburbia, the district reacted and Peterson organized a large community consultation on the issue that attracted 115 people, including all the high school principals, the police departments, a judge, parents, educators, and even the FBI. The three meetings that ensued gave birth to task forces and Peterson’s newsletter. “Parents were unaware of what was going on,” said Peterson, “one of their demands was to get an accurate picture of substance abuse on the campuses.”

The newsletter covers any and every possible substance abuse issue in the District and talks about national trends as well. Each issue has a theme: medicine abuse, new alcoholic products, parents’ responsibilities, proms, gender specific issues, media impacts including films, music, advertisement and the internet. Anyone can join Peterson’s mailing list by sending her a message at ellenpeterson@comcast.net. The newsletter can also be found on the Acalanes Union High School District (AUHSD) web site: www.acalanes.k12.ca.us/parents/ and on high schools web sites.

AUHSD Superintendent Jim Negri first met Peterson as she was busy copying her newsletter on the district’s copy machine. “Ellen is one of those dedicated volunteers who keep working on issues they really care about,” says Negri. In recognition of her work, the district awarded Peterson the Su Stauffer Friends of Education Memorial Award in 2006. “We are grateful for what she does and are happy to provide support in every little way we can,” adds Negri.

The number of people registering to receive the newsletter has increased

over time. Peterson believes this is because parents have stopped looking the other way. “I have seen a shift in parents’ tolerance for alcohol consumption over the years,” says Peterson, “one of the reasons may be the discovery of what alcohol does to teens’ brains.”

Drinking affects the pre-frontal cortex that controls impulses and inhibitions. That part of the brain is the latest to develop, well into adulthood. “The main concern with alcohol is that it makes kids do things they later regret,” explains Peterson, “alcohol abuse is linked to unprotected sex, fights, vandalism, pregnancy, not to even mention the terrible danger of drunk driving. One in four teenagers drinking before the age of 15 will have an alcohol problem,” she warns.

Alcohol is not the only substance our teens are abusing. Marijuana has held a favorite place for years. According to Peterson, its use has remained stable over the past twelve years in our district. “It’s at all the parties,” she says, “especially if there is no parental presence.” Marijuana is the more common problem reported by local substance abuse treatment centers. Marijuana addicts just “zone out” and lose their motivation to do anything other than consume their drug. According to Peterson, 50% of the students in the Acalanes school district will have tried marijuana by the time they graduate, and 15%- 20% are regular users.

If marijuana’s consumption has not changed, other substances have appeared in the students’ palette of choice for mischief. Opiates, pain relievers such as Vicodin, Percocet and Oxycontin, and stress-relieving drugs such as Valium find their way from medicine cabinets to teen pockets. Steroid use is on the rise among girls wanting to lose weight as well as boys. Ecstasy’s use subsided after a surge at the beginning of the 21st century, but Peterson fears that the use of breathalyzers at parties might have the adverse effect of increasing ecstasy or marijuana intake before parties.

As habits and teen trends change all the time, parents left with an overload of information can feel overwhelmed. “Alcohol is a rite of passage in our civilization, as a culture we celebrate everything with alcohol,” acknowledges Peterson, “if parents want to protect their children from abuse they need to start by modeling sobriety.”