

Talk It Up! Column

Red Ribbon Week and Beyond

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Red Ribbon Week is an alcohol, tobacco and other drug and violence prevention awareness campaign that is observed every year in October. In Orange County, this event to date has primarily been celebrated in the elementary schools. This year Tammy Havekost, Dept Chair of Student Support Services at Cedar Ridge High School, decided to step things up with an innovative approach. During Red Ribbon Week, October 22-26, the students' weekly "seminar" meeting was dedicated to a cross-curricular approach to substance use prevention. Teachers were encouraged to think outside the box as far as how to approach this issue within their subject area. For example, looking at related statistics and how to interpret them in math classes, exploring effects of substance use on the body and brain in science classes, discussing cultural differences in substance use in language classes, and more. Extracurricular groups also got into the spirit, with the Videography Club creating a PSA about how substance use can negatively affect youths' futures and OP's own ADAPT youth hosting a Peer Education table about substance use during lunch, to help spread correct information and knowledge.

Since we know that there are many lifelong consequences to underage drinking or other substance use, these efforts are incredibly important. Youth that start using alcohol before age 15 are five times more likely to develop alcohol dependency later in life. Alcohol and marijuana, two of the most commonly used substances for youth, can cause permanent damage to the brain and body. That can cause lifelong illnesses and/or preventing youth from achieving their full academic, sport, and overall potential. In addition, it's important to remember that alcohol use under 21 is illegal, and in NC all recreational marijuana use is illegal, no matter the age.

We applaud Ms. Havekost and the staff at Cedar Ridge for their efforts to connect the broader impacts of youth substance use by weaving it into what they teach over Red Ribbon Week. But we also know that this event on its own is not enough to ensure the safety of the youth in our community. As community members, we need to do what we can to support the messages of Red Ribbon Week outside of the schools and throughout the year. Here are some suggestions:

- If you work in a place where people from the public can come in, ask if you can put up a poster, flyer or brochures about youth substance use and the harms it can cause.
- If you see something, say something. Be a neighbor. For example, say thank you, or something else encouraging, if you see ID being asked for when alcohol is sold. Or remember the protections of the Good Samaritan law and call for medical help if someone needs it.
- If you are on social media, be mindful of the messages you are sending. Are you sending mixed messages by telling youth not to use while also posting memes about drinking to unwind or relax after a tough day? Are you making sure that any articles you share are from reputable sources and report non-bias information?
- If you are concerned about legal changes that may affect youth substance use, consider calling, writing, or meeting with local and state policy makers. Share your concerns and make sure they've thought through all contingencies and consequences. Ensure that your elected and

appointed officials are educated and understand their role in reducing youth access to dangerous substances. Talk to them about the importance of maintaining important policy safeguards.

- If there are youth in your life, be open with them about the importance of healthy decision making and the potential consequences of substance use. Make your expectations clear and be available as a resource for any questions they have.
- If you are part of a group, like a church or civic organization, consider bringing someone in to speak about these topics, like why it's so important to prevent youth use and what you can do to help.
- If you want to get more involved, or have opinions and experiences that would be beneficial to share, join us for Orange Partnership for Alcohol and Drug Free Youth's Coalition Meetings. These meetings are open to the public and we invite anyone with an interest in this issue to attend. The next meeting will be on November 14th, 9am-10:30am at the Orange County ABC Board on Valley Forge Road in Hillsborough.

If you have other ideas and need support, or want to try one of these but are not sure where to start, please reach out to Orange Partnership. It's the mission of this community coalition to help foster the safest, most healthy, community for all the youth of Hillsborough and northern Orange County. We are always here to support your efforts on this front. You can reach out to us on our website, orangepartnership.org.