

Prevention specialist Brenda Conlan returned to GA recently to meet with 10th grade students and to talk with Upper School parents in a presentation jointly sponsored by the Parents' Committee and the Counseling Department. Dr. Janet Maurer, Director of Counseling Services, summarizes the highlights:

The drug lady is back! If you or your child has been in the Middle School within the past 8+ years you know Brenda Conlan, aka the drug lady. Brenda has presented her Lifestyle Risk Reduction program (LRR) to GA 7th or 8th graders for many years. This year 10th graders also had the benefit of meeting with Brenda in small groups for compelling conversations about resisting or delaying the use of alcohol and other drugs. As you would imagine, the focus of the LRR groups differs by division. In Middle School, since most 7th or 8th graders are not involved in substance use, discussions center on the issue of prevention. The program in Upper School begins where the Middle School program leaves off, addressing two primary goals simultaneously: 1) intervention, and 2) the reward and validation of those who make healthy decisions.



Alcohol is the most widely used drug among young people, so LRR focuses mainly on that. With her familiar stand-up comedy delivery, Brenda described why there is so much confusion about alcohol use. There were many knowing nods when she said that alcohol can be many things (such as a drug or a beverage to savor with food), and it is hard to come up with a consistent parenting message about alcohol when we adults are often confused about the role that alcohol plays in our lives. What messages do we send to our children when we offer them champagne on New Year's Eve? Would we offer cocaine? Sex? We assume that young children usually listen to what parents say (i.e. alcohol is harmful to children), but teenagers are paying far more attention to what we do than to what we say, so our use/misuse of alcohol is observed intently.

Despite scary information in the news about teen alcohol abuse, Brenda said that the core group of students she met at GA was healthy. She reiterated that sentiment at the end of her week with the 10th grade. But alcohol use does create social connections that are difficult for non-users to navigate. Everyone who abuses alcohol has problems in their relationships, and these relationships impact others. Brenda likened this impact to the effect of second-hand smoke on non-smokers. While most of our students are not high risk drinkers, any amount of drinking excludes the non-drinkers. Kids who don't drink don't hang out in groups bonding over what they don't do, so, in effect, they may become invisible. Through LRR's frank discussions, Brenda attempts to give these students a voice.

Several other timely topics were addressed as well:

- **The Amethyst Initiative:** this refers to the movement by some college presidents to engage in a dialog about lowering the drinking age from 21 to 18. According to Brenda, lowering the drinking age would just trade one set of problems for another. If the drinking age is lowered to 18, then more younger children would be drinking (as any of us who grew up in areas where the drinking age was 18 can attest). If the drinking age remains at 21 then fewer kids may be drinking but they drink more dangerously (as the rise in binge drinking suggests).

- **Social norms monitoring:** this refers to providing teens with facts about alcohol usage to counter messages from the media that imply that most teens and college students use alcohol. In fact, current research states that only 35% of 15-16 year olds in the United States use alcohol. This means that 65% don't use!
- **Why talk about this?** The goal of drug and alcohol resistance education is to encourage teens to postpone their use until after they have mastered the developmental skills of adolescence.
- **Drinking only prepares one to drink:** Some people believe that if teens learn how to drink responsibly in high school they will be better able to handle the freedoms of college life. *Research does not support that theory.* In fact, teens who drink the most in high school also drink the most in college. Teens who abstain in high school might have one or two bad experiences with alcohol in college, but they are more likely to learn from their mistakes.

What can parents do to help their children make healthy choices and delay the possible use of alcohol or other drugs?

1. Communicate a loving non-use message (such as 'if anything ever happened to you I would be devastated').
2. Keep alcohol and prescription drugs locked.
3. Remember: all parents don't necessarily share your values - just because a parent is home does not necessarily mean that there is an adult in the house.
4. If your child is going to another child's house call their house phone (not child's cell phone) to offer help with food or chaperoning.
5. Network with the parents of your children's friends.
6. Pay attention!

Finally, Brenda left us with the following message: "Most kids are okay."

For additional information about Brenda Conlan and articles she has written about teen substance: www.brendaconlan.com. (Ms. Conlan's article, "[The Parent Trap](#)," distributed during her parent presentation, is also available on her website. Click the link and it will download to your desktop; it can be opened in MS Word or notepad.)

12/09/08. Dr. Janet Maurer. Photo by Dainis Roman.