

It's a sobering lesson to learn
Area experts say recent alcohol-related deaths won't change student drinking habits

By Halley Griffin, Daily News staff writer

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Rocks spell part of Stuart Robertson's name as part of a memorial at the base of a cliff next to east Main Street in Pullman on Wednesday. Police believe Robertson was killed when he fell from the cliff early Saturday morning.

Geoff Crimmins/Daily News

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Flowers are seen at a memorial for Stuart Robertson at the base of a cliff next to east Main Street in Pullman on Wednesday. Police believe Robertson was killed when he fell from the cliff early Saturday morning.

Geoff Crimmins/Daily News

Kyle Johnson and his friends were shocked when they heard a fellow University of Idaho student had died of a suspected alcohol overdose late last month.

"I don't think that happens a lot," said Johnson, 21. "Me and my buddies just drink on the weekends to have fun, but we don't drink to see how much we can drink."

At the same time, Johnson said many students cave to the perception that "you go to college, you drink."

The UI and Washington State University communities were shocked by a pair of recent student deaths in which alcohol likely was a factor, but neither students nor officials believe the tragic events will curb drinking.

Local tragedy

Local law enforcement and medical officials say the number of drinking-related injuries and offenses have held steady over the years, but the two unexpected deaths over the past few weeks have thrown student drinking into the spotlight.

UI student Daniel Miller, 23, was found unconscious by his roommates early in the morning of April 25, and authorities said his death resulted from apparent alcohol poisoning.

Just one week later, WSU student Stuart John Robertson, 21, apparently fell to his death off a 40-foot cliff about one-quarter mile east of Bishop Boulevard in Pullman.

Pullman police believe alcohol may have been a factor in Robertson's death as well, but won't know until they receive a toxicology report.

Moscow Police Lt. Paul Kwiatkowski said many students don't realize the potential consequences of drinking too much.

"It's very sad that (Miller) was drinking to the extent that he passed away from it," Kwiatkowski said. "That's just a waste."

'Won't happen to me'

WSU students Brent Dion and Nick Sacco, both 20, said campus has been buzzing with talk of Roberston's death, but neither of them believe it will lead many people to change their behaviors.

"No, I don't think it'll affect anything," Johnson said. "I think it's kind of an isolated incident."

Dion said events like an alcohol-related car crash in his Montana hometown have served as a wake-up call to him personally, but he believes the two recent deaths may not do much for the majority of students.

He said they need a personal connection to change their behaviors.

"Everyone else is under the 'That won't happen to me mentality,' " Sacco said.

UI psychologist Sharon Fritz agrees.

"I think it's sad that while this student's death has a huge impact, it's probably not going to motivate students to change their drinking," she said.

Trends

Local medical and law enforcement trends show that nothing has really influenced students to change their drinking over the years.

"It stays pretty constant," Kwiatkowski said.

The Gritman Medical Center emergency department also sees steady numbers from year to year.

Emergency Department Director John Hosentfeld said there's no real pattern, but the hospital has seen six to 27 alcohol-related injuries among 18- to 23-year-olds each month since the beginning of the school year.

"Obviously recently our attention's been drawn to it a lot more," he said, but in general there hasn't been an increase.

Most of the injuries they see have to do with acts of alcohol-fueled stupidity, like punching walls or jumping off of buildings, he said. A fatal alcohol overdose is rare.

Pullman Regional Hospital spokesman Josh Harman said the proportion of alcohol-related hospital visits has stayed the same over the years, but the blood-alcohol level on those visitors has increased.

He believes it has to do with the mixture of alcohol and energy drinks.

"People are getting so amped up that people don't realize how drunk they are," he said.

Education

Both WSU and the UI have extensive alcohol-education programs that aim to educate students how to drink safely and take care of themselves.

A major component of that education is teaching students what exactly they are drinking.

"Our alcohol educators tell us that the biggest problem is the amount of alcohol that students pour in a drink, and the mixing of energy drinks with the alcohol," said WSU Office of Student Conduct Associate Director Christian Wuthrich. "That can really fool people."

Fritz said these types of education programs mark a shift in the field of alcohol education over the past several years.

A report by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism in 2002 inspired the shift from pushing for abstinence to providing the tools to drink safely.

Educators now accept that student drinking will happen, and try to teach them without judgment.

"Before that report, students didn't want to engage," Fritz said.

Johnson said that switch is "huge" because "kids are always going to do it."

He even took the time to read a safe-drinking tips pamphlet he received from the UI when he turned 21.

'Respect yourself'

Fritz believes one of the biggest factors influencing drinking on campus is the perception that "that's what they're supposed to be doing."

Many young students come to college believing that the next four years are supposed to be a wild and crazy free-for-all.

"That means they don't even stop and check their behavior," she said.

Hosentfeld also said this particular age group tends to get messed up because they're young, inexperienced and often are away from home for the first time.

"So they aren't able to recognize that point where they go too far," he said.

Dion and Sacco agreed. They said they've seen too many people cave to challenges or other peer pressure to drink more.

Dion said the most important advice he could offer students is to learn who they are without alcohol first.

They don't need to impress their fellow students by winning drinking contests.

Sacco said many students end up drinking more than they should because they're trying to show off or find their place in college.

That's not necessary, he and Dion say.

"Establish yourself as a person solo," Dion said. "Don't go out and try to be a bad ass. Respect yourself."

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