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Recovery High School Considered For Cape

Safe Environment For Teens

Discussed At Substance Abuse Forum

By LAURA M. RECKFORD

Several dozen human services professionals, parents, and teens gathered last night at the Coonamessett Inn and discussed the possibility of founding a sober high school on Cape Cod.

The forum was co-sponsored by the Falmouth Substance Abuse Commission and Gosnold of Cape Cod.

Raymond V. Tamasi, Gosnold CEO, invited to the session doctors and other specialists in substance abuse from Gosnold, as well as the founder, principal, and several students from William J. Ostiguy High School in Boston, one of three new sober high schools in Massachusetts.

The emotional moments of the evening came when the teenagers spoke.

Danielle, who became the first student to earn her diploma from Ostiguy High School yesterday, spoke about how the school changed her life.

"There are no bad days at Ostiguy High," Danielle said.

For Danielle, attending the high school meant making a new group of friends, ones who are also in recovery.

The difference, Danielle said, is huge for a young person struggling with addiction.

At her old school, Friday was a day to make party plans for the weekend. Monday was a day to discuss those parties. When someone asked what she did over the weekend, Danielle said, it was difficult to respond, "I went to a [AA] meeting."

Her new friends, she said, "are on a different level. They see where you're coming from."

Danielle's friend, Christa, another Ostiguy High School student, went to school on the Upper Cape before becoming an addict, getting sober, and transferring to Ostiguy. She said she still has friends and family in Sandwich, Falmouth, Mashpee, and Hyannis.

"The Cape has a big problem," Christa said.

She said she tried to get help at school for her addiction problems. "I couldn't get the help. I had to move from the Cape to Boston" to attend Ostiguy, Christa said.

"Many of my friends have died from this disease," she said.

But she added, "I have no right to preach. I'm an alcoholic and a drug addict. Ostiguy is my second family. They've given me a foundation. Without them, I don't know where I'd be."

A 15-year-old Falmouth girl in the audience said she hoped a sober high school could be brought to the Cape.

"It's very hard to lead a 15-year-old life and a recovery life," she said. "We definitely need one of these on Cape Cod. It's a pressing issue."

William J. Ostiguy, the founder of the high school, explained how it got started. A lieutenant in the Boston Fire Department who was director of the fire department's employee assistance program, Mr. Ostiguy became interested in the idea when he was trying to help employees whose children were dealing with substance abuse problems.

He began researching the sober high school concept along with a group that included well-placed Boston politicians. The first sober high school opened in Minnesota in 1989 and the concept is rapidly spreading across the country.

Besides Ostiguy High School, the other two schools in Massachusetts are in Beverly and Springfield.

Ostiguy now has 14 students and a nine-person staff that includes both educators and counselors. The school expects to have 50 students by the fall.

Students who enroll in the school have to have been sober for 30 days, which is established by drug tests. The school day consists of academic classes, along with meetings, counseling, and "recovery-based" classes. When students graduate, they receive a diploma from their previous high school.

The school was started with \$2.75 million in funding from the state. Additional funds come from the schools that the students used to attend, similar to a vocational high school model.

Several people in the audience wanted to know how to start planning for such a school on the Cape.

The idea is not new on the Cape. The Barnstable County Human Services Advisory Council has already started talking about it.

Mr. Tamasi suggested that people attending last night's forum begin talking to politicians and other leaders on Cape Cod about the idea.

"Perhaps we've learned something tonight, a kernel of inspiration for greater scrutiny," Mr. Tamasi said.

The forum also featured statistical information on the subject of teens and addiction.

Paul Bender, the adolescent specialist at Gosnold, talked about what he sees "on the ground" these days with teens and addiction.

He talked about the prevalence of abuse of opiates, particularly OxyContin, but he also talked about the "gateway" drugs, in particular marijuana.

Mr. Bender said marijuana is very prevalent and there are a lot of misconceptions about it. The marijuana kids smoke today, Mr. Bender said, has been chemically engineered to be many times more potent than the marijuana available in the 1960s and '70s.

"This is not your father's weed," he said he tells young people.

Marijuana used to have half of one percent of the active ingredient, THC, Mr. Bender said. Now it typically has seven percent and has been found as high as 30 percent.

The difference in potency means that a few teens sharing one joint today is the equivalent of smoking 14 to 60 joints decades ago.

"It's a very different drug today," he said. "I'm here to tell you, it is a very powerful drug. It is very addictive and it [causes] withdrawal symptoms," Mr. Bender said.

Mr. Bender said parents and teens should be aware that the first step toward addiction is using drugs or alcohol to combat stress rather than just to "have fun."

"That in my mind is the turning point," he said.

People who use drugs all the time to deal with stress freeze their emotional development. "They are not learning about conflict resolution," he said.

Dr. James Maguire, the adolescent and child psychologist at Gosnold, talked about the adolescent brain and how the parts of the brain that come into play with addiction, like the parts that deal with decision-making and risk-taking, are at an early stage of development.