

Saving Teenagers

For some time now, I have been wondering about what is going on with Wallowa County youth regarding suicide, drinking, and taking drugs. Nationally these behaviors are part of a serious crises. Since I only visit the County occasionally it is hard to know how youth are behaving (if I were a youth today I would know exactly what is going on, adults are often clueless). So, I have begun to read as much as I can find on the matter and was immediately upset by a Chieftain interview in 2018 with the then Sheriff and District Attorney. Alarm bells went off when I read that the DA wanted to charge users as felons. Charging a youth as a felon for simple possession will likely ruin that child's life. Let me explain.

When I was in high school at Joseph my friends and I drank beer on Saturday nights (in retrospect it was pointless behavior). I was caught twice (slow learner) during Chief Joseph Days along with some friends and sent home with a very angry mother at about midnight. A few weeks later I went before the County Judge with my father, who knew the judge, and after the judge and my father had a good talk about how the crops were doing, the judge sentenced me to pay a \$340 fine, the standard punishment at that time (the value of that \$340 today is \$3,368). I had to pay it out of my own earnings. However, the infraction was a misdemeanor that would be wiped from the books upon reaching age 18. Not being a felon had an immense positive effect upon my future life.

Had I been charged as a felon I would not have received a scholarship to the University of Oregon, probably would not have been admitted to the University, and if no college, then I would not have become a naval officer, and so on down the long road of a more difficult life. On the application forms to the University and the Navy I self-admitted the misdemeanors and was easily admitted to both. Now some folks probably think I deserved a more difficult road in life for drinking as a teenager, however, not giving youth a second chance is a very bad idea. Youth have always tested the limits of adult authority as they approach adulthood with all the intense biological changes coursing through their young, maturing bodies.

From what I have read about the state of drug and alcohol abuse nationally we cannot incarcerate and penalize our way out of this crises and my own personal experience echoes that finding. All of my friends that were also arrested by the Oregon State Police on that rodeo weekend have gone on to become respected members of the community. However, due to the lethal and immediate addictive nature of new street drugs in 2023 my experience with alcohol as a teenager can no longer be considered typical or

harmless. We have entered a very dangerous new historical period for growing up in America.

So how do we get young people to be careful? Most importantly we need to talk straight and respectful to them. Using scare tactics and shaking the bony finger of sin and moral superiority will absolutely fail. Part of straight talk is recognition that kids will experiment within their peer group, and peer groups in the teen years are much more powerful than adults preaching “Just say no”. Another part of the problem is the corporate social media giants that now reinforce and distort the negative aspects of teen life in order to increase their earnings per share profits. The community can resist these forces in two ways: First, make addiction a medical issue and not a criminal problem; and second, we must constantly talk to the kids who are not addicted. This conversation cannot be a once a year meeting in the high school gym, it must be a constant presence in the school system. Having a weekly straight-talk class discussion led by a trained professional (not police) is probably more important than requiring algebra in the lives of most teenagers. It is about harm reduction from drugs and alcohol not morality and law breaking.

For youth who are already addicted and have committed a drug habit related crime, such as theft, being sentenced to a medical rehab program with the understanding that it will not be a felony on their record, would be one approach that should be considered. In the last two years I have had prescription drugs taken from my luggage twice, once in Wallowa County and once in Austin, Texas. I would much rather that the persons who took the drugs be required to do rehab rather than serve time as a felon. The other action that is a must is to interdict drugs at the distribution point, not at the street peddler point. On the street it is kids selling to other kids and arresting them as felons simply hardens their future years. Law enforcement needs to track the drug trail back to the regional distributors and at that point there should be severe penalties.

Some readers will say I am naïve and that we should lower the hammer and incarcerate everyone involved. My answer is “So how is that going?”. Ever since Nixon and Reagan’s war on drugs (D.A.R.E.) the problem has gotten much worse with millions of lives ruined in our prisons and thousands of overdose deaths. It is time for a different approach that might actually work.

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