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An Open Letter to Teens About Alcohol and Drugs

WHEN WE first talked about writing a letter directly to teenagers, many people told us not to waste our time. "If advertising campaigns don't get through, why do you think you can?" they warned. "They won't listen to you."

We don't believe that. We think that teens want someone to tell them the truth about alcohol and drugs, and we want to try.

Let's start with the obvious: a little alcohol gives most people good feelings. Many of you already know this. The average age when people take their first drink in this country is about 13. More than half of you high school seniors reported having had a drink in the last 30 days. You'll see 100,000 beer commercials by the time you turn 18. Their message? Drinking alcohol equals fun.

Here's another truth. Drinking a lot of alcohol can effectively numb very difficult feelings, and some of you have already experienced those. Researchers know that more than 25 percent of you have been physically abused. Almost one in five of you have had to

endure some kind of sexual abuse. And sometimes what you see is discouraging. There's bullying, environmental crisis, hypocrisy, hatred, injustice, homelessness. Many young people are confused and fearful a fair amount of the time, and that's not how it's supposed to be. Maybe one reason why almost 2 million heavy drinkers in this country are under age 21 is because you see so much and feel so deeply, and much of what you see isn't pretty.

But while alcohol and drugs can medicate these feelings temporarily, it does so at a cost. You need to decide if it's worth it.

Perhaps the biggest price you'll pay is with your health. Someone's probably told you already that alcohol is a highly toxic substance. Young people die every year from "alcohol poisoning" - simply drinking too much at one sitting. But even when you don't drink that way, we now know that alcohol is much more damaging to people under 21 than to those who are older. Because your physiology is more sensitive, treatment professionals see individuals do far more harm to them-

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selves abusing alcohol from age 12 to 18 as others do when they start at 21 and abuse the drug till they're 40.

Also, when people abuse alcohol, at any age, they make bad decisions more easily. Maybe they get behind the wheel of a car and injure someone. The truth is that alcohol is involved in more than 40 percent of fatal car crashes where the drivers are between 18 and 20. Sexually active young couples who drink use condoms less frequently, leading to accidental pregnancies and greater risk of HIV. And researchers believe that alcohol use is involved in as many as two thirds of sexual assaults or date rapes among young people.

There's also a third risk you probably don't know about. It now appears that the younger you start drinking, the more likely you are to become an alcoholic - perhaps keeping you from everything you ever hope to have. Like someone to care about, a career where you can make a difference, travel, or a nice home. In the United States, about 10 percent of people will have a problem with alcohol or drugs sometime in their lives. If you start abusing alcohol or drugs when you're in your teens, that percentage more than doubles!

You've probably heard some of this before now. But I think the real reason to wait isn't often talked about. That reason has to do with your role in the future. Our future.

You see, when we look at you, we remember what's really important. You come to the problems of the world with a hope and enthusiasm we need. You have fresh perspectives and idealism. You care. You demand to know why

things are the way they are. Whether we admit it to ourselves or not, adults are well aware that we have done a less than admirable job in taking care of the world and of each other. Many of us are anxious about this new, diverse world that feels more normal to you. Most of us thought that technology would solve the world's problems - and now we know that it creates some new ones.

So here's the real reason to consider waiting to experience alcohol: You are just too important to put yourself at risk. Too important to die behind the wheel, or hurt someone else, or leave school due to pregnancy, or contract HIV. You are too important to risk becoming an alcoholic or drug addict. Yes, alcohol "works" - temporarily. But some of us are learning that we don't have the luxury to numb the feelings that drive us to make a difference. We have to try. We can't give up. Just the fact that you are here among us makes us look for ways to help you find real meaning - and when we do that for you, we find it ourselves. We need you safe and we need you sober. You're that important to our future. ☺

This message is brought to you by Serenity Lane - Alcohol & Drug Treatment Centers in Oregon and Washington. Written by Jerry Gjesvold, recovering alcoholic/drug addict - 31 years sober, and father of an alcoholic/drug addict who is now also successfully in recovery. Find us on the web at: www.serenitylane.org and on Facebook.

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