

Laura Mersereau Memorial Award Essay Contest

Often students at my high school joke that if you want to buy drugs, you can ask almost any student in the hallway, and they would tell you who to call. Unfortunately, this “joke” is not far from the truth, and it is not just in the halls of my high school but in the halls of high schools all throughout Oregon. Far too many students abuse drugs and alcohol for many reasons, including the media, a way to relieve stress, and their peers. I am an advocate of being drug free, and everyday I stand against them.

Teens are bombarded by the media, with things that almost encourage alcohol and drugs. Teens hear songs on the radio, watch television shows and Hollywood movies everyday that are constantly glamorizing drug use. The teenage years are prime years of brain development, and it is easy for teens to be impacted by the media.

Over 70% of high school students that drink or use drugs say they do so to cope with their stress from school or family. Alcohol and drugs provide a temporary “escape” for teens; many teens feel like their worry is gone when they are drunk or high.

Countless numbers of my peers drink and abuse drugs simply because they think it is a good way to have “fun” with their friends. Often I think kids purposely forget the side effects of drugs and alcohol because they want to have a good time. Teens like to believe that they are invincible; someone *else* might overdose from drugs, or get into a car accident while driving drunk, but it will never happen to *them*. When teens are surrounded by their friends who have drank or done drugs for a long amount of time and have never been hurt, then this idea is reinforced. Many teens have not witnessed the terrible effects that drugs can have on someone first hand, and therefore they convince themselves that the side effects are not real.

Recently, on a Monday morning at school, I heard about a girl that had a party over the weekend because she was new to my school and she wanted to make friends, even though she does not use drugs or alcohol. Similar to this girl, many teens drink or use drugs to fit in and to make friends. When a large majority of students are using alcohol or drugs, it is easy to assume that this is the “cool” thing to do. As soon as I heard about her party, I invited the girl to lunch with me. We talked about how it can feel cool to be drug free.

I resist the influence of drugs not only because I know of the devastating effects of drugs and alcohol, but because I have seen how destructive alcohol and drugs can be in my peers and my family. I was very close with a girl for the entirety of middle school. We drifted apart when she started to experiment with alcohol and drugs in high school, and now she has become someone almost unrecognizable to me. This is what happens with many, many, many teens during high school. I think it is easy for some teens to be “sucked into” the idea that alcohol and drugs are cool; that they will “climb higher” on the social ladder if they experiment with them.

I also resist drugs and alcohol because I have seen drugs hurt my family. My brothers and I grew up very close to our cousins; we saw them almost every day and they were my best friends. During my cousins’ lives, my uncle has become addicted to prescription medicine. It is one of the worst feelings in the world to see how his addiction

has torn his family apart. In my youth, I remember my oldest cousin as being funny, outgoing and artistically talented beyond belief. When I am older, I know that I will look back on him as being extremely introverted; he is scared to leave his basement and has almost lost his love for art, something that defined him while we were growing up. Unfortunately I would not be surprised if he turns to drugs as well, I think it is hard to escape where you come from.

Seeing the terrible affects of drugs and alcohol has shaped my opinion of substance abuse. Seeing people hurt themselves and the people around them because of substance abuse has made me want to become a "crusader" against teenage drug use. For around five months I have volunteered at Oregon Partnership's YouthLine, and this is a step I take every week towards preventing my peers from substance abuse. When friends at school talk about alcohol or drugs, I always say something about both the short and long term effects of alcohol and drugs. When I know someone does not use drugs or alcohol, I try to tell them everyday how cool that it is and how they must be a very strong person.

Teenage drug use in 8th, 10th, and 12th graders has declined by 25% since 2001, but there is still a huge number of teens using alcohol and drugs. I believe that there are not enough advocates of being drug free, instead there are far too many people bragging about using alcohol and drugs. By volunteering at YouthLine and talking to my peers at my school I try everyday to be an advocate for preventing substance abuse. I may not convince everyone that I talk to that drugs and alcohol are bad, but I know that by talking to my peers about being drug free I am making at least a small difference. A few weeks after we had lunch, the new girl at my school thanked me for talking to her; although we didn't become close friends, she said it felt good to know that she was not alone in wanting to be drug free.