



Sandhills Sense

Real Help for Real People!

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Melissa has been practicing in the field of mental health and substance abuse for the past 10 years. She received her undergraduate education at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln and completed her graduate work at Arizona State University. She has experience in State and local governmental organizations, hospitals, community mental health, corrections, and private practice.

Growing up and currently ranching with her family on their ranch in Central Nebraska, Melissa has an understanding of the unique challenges and strengths of rural life. She combines her urban knowledge and experience with her rural roots to provide quality, professional, individualized services.

Who Benefits?

When I first moved back to this area, at least two people a day asked me, “How big is our meth problem?” It took me some time to arrive at an opinion. . . but I have a strong one: We do have meth in our communities and everyone needs to be educated about methamphetamine and the personal, familial and environmental effects and risks. However, the bottom line is that the meth problem in our community does not hold a candle to the alcohol problem.

Born and raised in this area, I have heard over and over again, “There is nothing else to do in this community but drink”. Taking the first drink is a choice. Adults, teens, elderly, youth; we know the difference between right and wrong at the age of 7 years old and are accountable for the choices we make. Par-

ents can be a negative or positive influence, but ultimately cannot control the choices their children make. As I have thought about this issue further, I have started to think about the culture in our rural communities. Do we have a culture in our communities that condones underage drinking?

Parents often justify holding parties for kids and keeping their keys, stating, “At least we know they are safe!” Is going to jail for that party worth it? Nebraska law says if a parent hosts an alcoholic party for youth, that parent can go to prison. Is hosting a party so kids can break the law instilling the values and morals we “ruralites” pride ourselves on? Do parents want to send the message that we can choose when and where the rules should apply? Do parents want to send the message to their children that addictive substances are ok to use if there is no driving after

consumption or if no one gets caught? Are we sending the message that the greatest form of fun is drinking and we are allowed to break the rules because this fun is worth it?



Does this concept apply to other areas of life? Consider stealing. Would we tell our youth that stealing is against the law, but if I make stealing a little less obvious and attempt to ensure safety for all involved, it is ok to steal? (Continued next page)

Who Benefits? (continued)

Would we tell our youth that it is ok to break the law as long as an adult helps or no one faces legal consequences?

The most recent Nebraska Risk and Protective Factor Student Survey confirms that alcohol is the drug of choice of Nebraska students. In fact, by twelfth grade, 79% of students report having consumed alcohol at some point in their life, and more than 52% of all Nebraska high school students report using alcohol on a regular basis. A 2004 study by the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation found that the costs of underage drinking in Nebraska totaled \$435 million in 2001 alone, and that underage drinkers consumed more than 25% of all alcohol sold in the state (\$156 million in sales).

The number one predictor of underage drinking is lack of parental involvement. But if the parental involvement frequently involves alcohol, it

does not count. Some parents may say that they are modeling healthy, moderate consumption and that is important for their children. However, is not drinking in front of our youth a better choice?

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Of the teens that drink, most start before the age of 15. The earlier a child starts consuming alcohol, the greater the risk for addiction in the future. In addition, the brain is still developing. Permanent cognitive changes happen in the brain that affect the long term memory and learning skills of people who begin drinking during

their formative years.

When faced with difficult decisions, I often challenge people to ask themselves, “Who benefits from this decision?” I can encourage parents to have strict curfews, always know where their kids are going, be involved in their children’s interests and activities, and be certain to talk to their kids about the risks of alcohol and peer pressure. The bottom line is, we have to look at our culture. Is our culture too accepting of underage drinking? If it is, who benefits from this?



Would you like to feature Sandhills Sense in your publication?

Melissa is dedicated to improving rural lives through education and involvement in rural communities. Her articles discuss common problems with a common sense approach.

Sandhills Sense is currently featured in rural publications in Nebraska. If you would like to include “Sandhills Sense” in your publication, please contact Melissa at

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