Saying Yes to Drugs? Part III: Starting with New Questions

In 1995, I graduated from Mater Dei High School. Blessed with a wonderful education and conscientious, loving parents, I was well prepared for college and beyond. High school was a time of much growth and development, and many people played an important role during this time. In a few years, Amy and I look forward to sending our kids to MD and providing the same gift of faith formation and strong academics to them.

Beneath the positivity, though, I experienced challenges that are not exclusive to Mater Dei, but certainly were a challenge there. Although I was fortunate to not experience drug use directly while in high school (although I was aware of individuals engaging in it), underage drinking was a constant presence. Parties at homes, outdoor areas, river camps, etc. regularly involved significant amounts of alcohol, and presented numerous challenges for those who wanted to be socially connected, but also did not have a desire to use substances to any (or even some) degree. Today, consistent with the growing use nationally of marijuana and prescription pills, I have good reason to believe that all of our major high schools in town have a strong alcohol/drug subculture as I consistently hear from youth, parents, and teachers throughout the area.

Yet what is even more concerning is that much of this subculture is not only somewhat ignored by parents and others in various positions, but at times even enabled and supplied. As I mentioned in the first segment, it is often done under the auspices of “keeping impaired teens” off the streets. But enabling illicit substance use not only supports a national crisis, it enables dependence/abuse for entire lives. Consider this. If we as a society curbed early substance use through more assertive means, then even if certain teens engage in impaired driving (which some will anyway), we theoretically reduce the tremendous risk incurred by a lifelong substance abuser who drives impaired for up to fifty years or more. However, if we allow or promote early substance abuse, then we are in effect increasing the percentages of individuals who will never stop abusing drugs and alcohol, and will be (driving) on our streets for a long period of time.

I recently spoke with a parent of a youth from a high-achieving local high school who indicated that a large party was held for freshman in which a number of illicit activities occurred while the host’s parents were present. This parent described the awkward, difficult position in which the youth was placed, and how in many ways, there is a sense that this teen must forego many future social engagements if the desire to “stay clean” is honored. This isn’t a new problem. But it is a serious one. There is no doubt that youth will (and always have) experimented to some point. But when this experimentation is sanctioned by parents and/or high-standing members of society, it creates a really confusing situation for youth in deciding what is right and wrong, and what should be done. Especially when these youth often have up to a decade of brain development—corresponding to areas of impulse control, emotional regulation, and higher-order thinking—left to go.

Growing up on the West Side of Evansville, I was exposed to the alcohol culture that was often associated (fairly and unfairly) with the German Catholics of today. Whether extended family members or close family friends, I came to realize how indoctrinated alcohol use was into many people’s daily
lives. It was often the butt of jokes or the shrug of shoulders, but unfortunately for many, it severely affected lives and led many of those in subsequent generations to adopt its ways. So many of the people that I dearly love have paid a significant price—one that did not have to be paid.

So if we are to make any real changes in the trends of today, we all have to begin with a simple question posed in reverse: Does my substance use, or sanctioning of illegal substance use, send a message that contradicts the values and laws of our land? If so, am I willing to take difficult steps to change what I do, and to have conversations with others about doing the same? If parents and families don’t take these questions seriously, then I firmly believe that no amount of high-quality initiatives or policies will really make a sustained difference. We have to be motivated as a collective community of people invested in the future of our youth to make a difference. And wouldn’t that be nice.

If we are in the business of really making change, then we also have to consider a few others factors at play. It is critical to understand that just as media can be an agent of good decisions, it really can be an agent of bad ones as well. Any parent who doesn’t think that it is a big deal that their youth is watching movies with adult content (or engaging in any type of similar viewing) at any early age is fooling themselves, especially when it comes to substance use. Just as new fashion lines are often launched through a single popular flick, so also are substance trends influenced in what is seen as “cool” and “edgy”. Anyone remember the Joe Camel campaign? In 1991, the Journal of the American Medical Association published a study indicating that nearly as many 6-year-old children could identify Joe Camel with cigarettes as could Mickey Mouse with Disney. Despite R.J. Reynold’s denial that they were marketing children, almost 33% of cigarettes sold to underage youth were Camels, up from less than 1% previously.

We all have some say about the advertising that occurs in our town. But we have a much greater say about the content that is viewed in our homes. Whether direct or embedded advertising (e.g., a bottle of Budweiser sitting on a table in a movie), our youth are exposed to millions of influential messages in their lives. Want a simple way to reduce risk of substance abuse from the earliest of ages? Limit screen access. All kinds of screen access. Including commercials. If all parents made an effort to do so during those early years of formative brain development, it would really provide a great start. Instead of completing the sentence “This ____ for you” with “Bud’s,” youth unconsciously might start considering that this phrase opens up many other potentials.

If we started with these two factors, then it would certainly give us a “leg up” in considering other needed changes, such addressing parenting/familial challenges, peer issues, academic failure, and other risk factors. But until we begin to create better awareness and mobilization regarding the role of media and the familial/generational influence of substances, it is unlikely that much change will occur. These two factors are so deeply imbedded, so unconsciously ingrained into daily life that you can literally see youth or young adults fall into substance patterns with almost no conscious thought. Almost as easy as sliding a beer into a coozy or swallowing a pain med. Goes down smooth until life starts getting harder and harder each day. Then substances can go from a regular pleasure to a constant need in order to deal with the challenges. And that’s when addiction really sets in.
Consider one final comparison. Many people addicted to substances benefit from various rehabilitation programs, including 12-step programs such as AA. However, the long-term success rates of these programs vary widely depending on which report is accepted. At best, it is 50% for those who complete them in full; at worst, it is no better than 5-10% and this doesn’t even address the significant time and expense incurred. Attrition rates are up to 90-95% for voluntary programs, and it is estimated that up to 90% of those who need treatment for substance issues never actually get it. Now, contrast this with the statistic that I noted in the first part of this series: 2.1 percent of those who wait until 21 will develop alcohol abuse and dependence in their lifetime. That means almost 98% will not. Evidence suggests similar results for those who don’t use other drugs until this age, too. I think it is fair to say that this is the success rate we all desire.

Is there any question that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure? Or maybe 12 ounces in this case? Regardless of what you think of the ideas put forth, imagine our homes, schools, and roadways if the trends were going away from, not towards, substance use and abuse. I know it’s complicated. I know there are a lot of competing factors. But just for a second, imagine all the people...