

At my seventeenth birthday party there were two kegs of beer and three bottles of vodka. I celebrated this party in Brazil, and my host parents bought the alcohol, as this consumption is an accepted part of Brazilian society. Many Americans believe that other countries have alcohol abuse in check because drinking is out in the open. However, after living in Brazil for a year I witnessed the pressure teens felt to drink, and saw how situations can easily get out of control. On the other hand, I saw how some people resisted the societal pressure to drink. Drinking can be harmless, but it can easily spin unpredictably out of control.

After less than a month in Brazil, I had experienced my fair share of the culture of drinking. I hadn't seen anything horrific happen, so I was one of those Americans who accepted this cultural difference. One night, my host brother and I went to one of his friend Juliano's house to "warm up" before a party. I thought that Juliano was really cute, and I hoped that I would get to hang out with him more often. Unfortunately, the next couple times I would see him I would start to think less and less of him. About a month later I went to a birthday party in another city that everyone was excited about because it would have an open bar with champagne and Absolut vodka. I thought that the alcohol selection was a strange reason to want to go to a birthday party; I get excited to go to birthday parties to celebrate the person's birthday. This was the first time I was truly disturbed that fun had to be equated with alcohol. Throughout the party I was hanging out with Juliano and the more and more he drank, the more and more I disliked him. I saw Juliano drink at least eight bottles of champagne by himself, and he could easily have drunk much more. His friends realized how much he was drinking, and started giving him

water. I saw Juliano wander away and told one of his friends that he wasn't at the table anymore. I went to talk to someone else, and all of a sudden I heard a commotion- there was a fight in the bathroom. It was Juliano. He had punched some locals as well as two of his best friends. He then got kicked out of the party by security and passed out in a car.

My host brother, who was the only one besides me who was sober, decided to take Juliano to the hospital. We had two cars, so my brother and I took Juliano in one car, and 3 other boys met us at the hospital in another car. Turns out, Juliano shouldn't have even been drinking because he had taken steroids for several years and had severe liver problems. Juliano was discharged from the hospital a few hours later and we brought him back to where we were staying to rest. However, when he woke up early the next afternoon, wearing sunglasses to cover his two black eyes, he started drinking again. I was appalled that he was consuming again after less than 24 hours of being hospitalized for drinking too much.

The next couple months I avoided Juliano, and I started hanging out with a new group of people who did not equate alcohol with fun. Juliano invested in a nightclub, and I thought that he was getting his life back on track. Then in May, seven months after I took him to a hospital after drinking too much, Juliano died in a car crash. He was the driver, and he had been drinking.

Juliano is a perfect example of someone who started drinking socially, and it spiraled out of control. Many teens begin drinking because it is a societal norm, and think that one

beer can't do any harm. However, the "just one more" mentality is the most difficult thing to resist. Going out every weekend and having one beer can easily turn into two, and that can easily turn into three. Before that person knows it, he or she *is* Juliano- who gets into fights and has to go to the hospital. I removed myself from that group of people- the "partiers" in my city- and starting going out with other people. Although they also drank, it was to a much lesser degree. I never heard anyone from my new group say a party was going to be fun because of the alcohol that was going to be there.

Alcohol and drugs are substances that have been present in society for thousands of years, and will never go away. In contrast to the US, Brazilian teens do not hide their drinking from their parents, making it seem safer, but this is just a facade. Any sort of teen drinking is dangerous, as teens do not have a grasp of their limits. Regardless of the drinking age, teens around the world should wait until they know themselves and their bodies better before drinking. If this happens when someone is 21, they can start drinking if they wish to. If this doesn't happen until someone is 81, only then should they allow themselves to drink alcohol. Too often alcohol is involved in tragedy, and each individual needs to consciously control their own relationship with alcohol.

Courage to Bypass the Gates of Destruction

Drugs and alcohol are the most rampant and indiscriminate agents of destruction present in society today. The cords of addiction threaten to grab hold of us in our youth, entangling our minds and suffocating our dreams until we are mere shadows of our former selves. Teenagers turn to drugs as an escape from reality, in search of a thrill, and in response to overwhelming peer pressure, never dreaming that substance abuse will destroy them from the inside out. As a young adult in the midst of this raging war, I feel personally called to take a resolute stand against drugs and alcohol, and passionately encourage others to do the same by setting a positive example and promoting thoughtful and educated decision making.

Portland, Oregon is a tragic portrait of a city ravaged by drug and alcohol abuse. I hadn't spent much time downtown until I started volunteering at a homeless shelter for drug rehabilitation, City Team Ministries. While ladling soup into bowls, my heart broke to watch the slumped over figures of the men and women shuffle through the line; tired, apathetic, drained of life. As I struck up conversations, they opened up and came alive, revealing elements of their past and current struggles. They're not just "no-good homeless druggies," but instead unique individuals, each with a story to tell. It was a colossal perspective check for me to realize that these men and women were once "just regular kids," teenagers, like those I see everyday at school. They once had dreams and plans, but all those were swept aside to make room for the insatiable demands of addictive substances.

It pains me to watch many of my peers inch down that same path littered with empty beer bottles and dirty needles, unaware of the deep pitfalls imbedded on the road of drugs and alcohol. As I sit in class on Monday morning and listen to the gossip and half-remembered stories of this and that party, I wonder "Why?"

Looking around at my peers, I believe some of them turn to drugs because they haven't developed a healthy way to cope with the stress and trauma of their day-to-day lives. They're looking for an outlet, an escape from the pain of a broken relationship, the stress of a failing grade, the hurt of a parents' divorce. When times are tough, drugs offer a false façade of comfort that many teenagers fall back upon.

Other students are simply looking to indulge themselves in the thrill and excitement that surrounds illicit substances. They have a “Why not?” attitude, buying into the myth that to be young is to be invincible and bulletproof. Our culture indoctrinates us to believe that the here and now is all there is; the message repeatedly sent through the media is, “If it feels good, do it.” Many teenagers are curious, not wanting to miss out on the experience they’ve heard so much about. If some individuals in a group or team start experimenting, the others feel pressure to follow suit or risk sounding self-righteous and square in their refusal to participate in seemingly harmless “cool” activity.

The most challenging factor is the inability of most teenagers to look beyond the present trials and temptations. While taking a hit of marijuana or guzzling a can of beer, the sensation of the moment blurs the realm of the future; no teenager ever sets out to harm themselves, wound others, or become an addict but unfortunately that is the potential reality.

In fifth grade I signed a pledge to remain drug free for the rest of my life. I’m now a senior in high school and still going strong on my commitment, but I won’t deny I’ve been sorely tempted. I have a need to escape, a sense of curiosity, and a desire to be accepted, just like everyone else. The allure of drugs and alcohol is undeniable, but I always come back to the truth that the temporary benefits are simply not worth the ultimate impact. Potential is my biggest anti-drug. I see the horizon so broad and bright before me; how could I casually risk throwing away my future for a temporary high? I believe in digging deeper and pursuing true joy over temporary pleasure. I want to experience this life to the fullest, reveling in the exquisite beauty all around me and living everyday with no regrets. I want to give back to my community, and develop the talents within me to make a difference, one small act of kindness at a time. There is simply no room for drugs and alcohol as I pursue a carefree yet meaningful life.

My conviction to remain drug-free extends outward to the peers at my school as I seek to motivate others to abstain. By enthusiastically embracing healthy recreational and social activities, I demonstrate that drugs and alcohol aren’t a prerequisite to have a good time. I value every opportunity to lead by example, whether it’s on my sports teams or with my own younger brother. I view everyone as a friend, reaching out to others, that

they need not reach down for drugs. I can't control what others do, but I can talk to my friends, respectfully questioning their choices, encouraging them to contemplate the question I always ask myself: "Am I actively becoming the person I desire to be?"

Teenagers today justify their drug usage by saying: "It won't affect me," but the reality is a different story. Even if the road doesn't end at a rehab center downtown, the havoc drugs wreak on the body, the relationships, and the future of an individual are truly tragic. Drugs offer ephemeral pleasure, but bring ultimate destruction; I want to save as many as my peers as possible from such a fate. My goal is to live in such a way that those who are tempted might find solidarity, and that those who are engaged in drug abuse might see the light, and alter their course before it's too late.

Laura Mersereau Memorial Award Essay

Although Beaverton is a large town with many attractions, I think a lot of students feel there is not a lot to do for our age group. As a high school Senior, at times I feel like I'm too old for mini-golf and bowling but too young for other activities with an age requirement. Most of the time teenagers will end up hanging at somebody's house, and that's when using drugs or alcohol take place. Sitting at somebody's house can get boring and old for some, and that's when they resort to the use of drugs and alcohol. They feel if they're under the influence they will have more fun. I would say a majority of the time teens partake in the use of illegal substances because they feel all of their friends are and they want to fit in. Because most people feel this way, if a couple of people stopped using, other people would stop using as well.

Students also use drugs and alcohol as a "release." They think that using these substances will relieve them of their stress and allow them to have a good time. They think drugs or alcohol will allow them to have more fun. The truth is those stresses and issues will still be there once they are off the influence and having fun does not require them to be under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

I have a pretty good insight of why students drink or use drugs because I used to partake in those activities. I started drinking at a young age, while I was in middle school. I thought it was fun and that others would think it was cool that I'd drink on the weekend. At the time, it just added more fun to an ordinary Saturday night. I had a group of friends that I'd always hangout with and although we did have a good time, I knew it wasn't what I should be doing.

It wasn't until just before my freshman year I started to realize that what I was doing wasn't good for me or my body. What really turned my life around was going to Wild Horse Canyon, a week long summer camp. It had a religious focus and it really opened my eyes to see the mistakes I'd been making and how they affected not only me, but others around me as well. I knew I hadn't been living my life as I should have and I felt horrible for the activities I'd been doing. After that camp I stopped drinking and because of that I lost a few friends who I used to partake in these activities with. They didn't understand why I wasn't doing it and ridiculed my decision. It was hard but I realized the choice I made was the right one and if they couldn't accept it then they didn't deserve my friendship. I wish more people would be willing to lose a few poor friends in return for a better way of living and a healthier future.

The most challenging factor when facing the decision whether or not to use alcohol or drugs is definitely peer pressure and the fact that many other people are succumbing to this activity. Peer pressure might be considered a text-book answer but it's the truth. When one's friends are all drinking or using drugs they feel that they should to whether it be to fit in or experience the same things their

friends are. Even though most people don't actually verbally pressure their friends into drinking, they still feel pressured because their friends are doing it and they feel like they're expected to as well.

Now, I hang out with friends who respect the decisions I make and who have the same interests I do. I'm involved in sports, clubs at my school such as DECA, Link and National Honor Society and I'm also a student leader for Beaverton's Young Life Club. My friends all respect me and I respect them. The most important thing a person can do is surround themselves with positive people who will have a positive impact on them. They should rid themselves of the negative influences that pressure them to drink or use drugs. What I can and will do to help others get above the influence is urge them to get involved at school and with activities in the community. I'm very involved and busy and it doesn't even allow me to partake in substance abuse because I have so many other things that are so much better to do. I volunteer at PAL (Police Activities League) after school day care and I feel that I provide a positive influence in their lives. I try to be a positive person so that others see that they don't need to drink or use drugs to be happy and have a good time.

Keep the Future Bright

It is hard to go one day without hearing a story about one of my peers drinking or abusing drugs and doing something they later immensely regretted. It has become the societal norm that high school and college aged students will experiment with drugs and alcohol. As they say, kids will be kids. But isn't it time for students to wake up and realize how damaging their actions are to their body and others around them? Every day, teenagers across the country die from drug and alcohol related accidents. Students take drugs for a variety of reasons, but I chose not to take part in this by thinking about what my future has to offer.

Every year, about 5000 young people die from alcohol consumption and thousands more from other drug abuse, but still teens choose to use drugs and alcohol. Why is this? What would cause teens to make these choices, the same ones that have taken the lives of so many just like themselves? One reason many teens do this is out of boredom. When there is nothing better to do, many teens take part in risky activities. Another influencing factor on teen substance use is rebellion. As we get to the age where freedom is so close, but still not there, teens want to constantly test the boundaries, and see what else is out there. When a parent forbids their child from doing something, this often provides an increasing incentive to try it. So they see what they can get away with, without realizing the devastating consequences they could be faced with. I think this is one of the most significant factors in teen drinking and drug use- they don't know or don't think about what affects could come from their actions. It is more fun for students to act and ask questions later than to think about the repercussions of their actions.

The most challenging factor that teens must overcome when faced with the decision of drug and alcohol use is the necessity to fit in. I know from experience that many of my peers will drink at a party because they want to seem cool, regardless of the fact that they don't even like the taste or affects of alcohol! Teens want to feel more mature, especially while in high school. They will take unnecessary risks to prove to themselves and others around them that they are mature and cool. They fail to realize that being an annoying drunk who throws up at a stranger's house is slightly less than mature. Many high school students feel like alcohol and drug use will make them cooler, mature, and tougher, but this clearly isn't the case.

When I started high school, I made a personal decision not to take part in drinking or drug use. I decided I would rather go through my high school years being able to control and remember my actions, without having chemicals mess with my head. However, I will admit that sometimes it is tempting to just try it out, but whenever I think about my future it is simple for me to say no. I have high aspirations for myself, and I don't feel that risking any of these goals is worth using drugs or alcohol. When a friend offers me a beer, I only have to think about how promising my future is to say no. I would rather not quite fit in than jeopardize everything I have going for me to drink. I think by talking to other teens around me about their aspirations, and how drug and alcohol use would change them, might make other teens think twice about substance use. Many people my age don't fully understand the risks involved with drug and alcohol use. I honestly believed if everyone understood what these substances do to your body, and how using them can mess up nearly every single plan for the future, there would no longer be an issue. Once people realize how different their future may end up from drug and alcohol use, it will be easy for them to say no.

Teen drug and alcohol use is a huge issue today, and is driven by many factors, but by encouraging teens to think about their future we could help to overcome this issue. Every future is so bright, but every time a teen uses drugs or alcohol it becomes dimmer and dimmer. Let's keep teens futures bright by encouraging them to think about the effects of substance use.

Looking back on that night, she wished it all could have been erased. Just several days before, Sarah had it all. Student Council Class Officer. Varsity Volleyball. Homecoming Princess. Yet she chose to throw it all away. That night, Sarah chose to drink. She and several other intoxicated friends went to the Homecoming dance, were promptly caught with alcohol, tacked with MIP's, and kicked out of the dance. A ten-day suspension followed. Sarah forfeited her position on Student Council, and, more significantly, forfeited the respect of the many students that had previously looked up to her.

I have only been alive for seventeen years, but I have seen this all too many times. Every year, a story like Sarah's arises when students foolishly choose to experiment with prohibited substances. Although many try to justify the use of drugs and alcohol, among teens there is an explicit problem, and this problem can no longer be ignored. The main reason that students drink and take drugs is to fit in socially, and the only way to effectively attack this problem is to target the source: social situations.

The most challenging factor affecting the decision for a student to use drugs is a desire for social cohesion. By its very nature, high school is an important time of self-discovery where students continually find themselves searching for their identity. Part of this journey is finding a group of friends that one can cling to. Students drink and take drugs to fit in socially – to “be a part” of a group. Unfortunately, if this group happens to be one surrounded with drugs, it will not offer the social fulfillment that one needs in a friend group.

Many try to justify the use of drugs, saying that “everyone else is doing it.” Some try to cover up their fault by blaming it on “peer pressure”, but peer pressure should not be isolated as the cause of student drug problems. We all have a choice. With the

problems of drug use among individuals, it is not the fault of the group. It is the fault of the student who chose to put themselves in that group and then knowingly take drugs.

In an individual's drive to assimilate through the use of the drugs and alcohol, the short-term and long-term effects are often overlooked. Many argue that drugs are virtually harmless, saying that they will use drugs "only one time." However, as the account of Sarah points out, all it takes is one time to wreck one's life.

Also, some individuals claim that they can stop "whenever they want to." I have witnessed the severe fallacy of this statement with people in my own life. Last year, Scott, one of my good friends, became distanced from his old friend group and soon began experimenting with illegal substances. I witnessed an addiction forming. He kept telling me that he was in complete control of his drug usage and that he could stop whenever he wanted to. For something superficial, Scott abandoned all his old friends. For a lifeless concept, Scott abandoned his personality. Now, every time I look at Scott, I see him drifting farther and farther away. The more he becomes surrounded with drugs, the more he lacks fulfillment, and the more he lacks fulfillment, the more he seeks out the empty promises of drugs. Like too many other students, Scott has entered a cycle of detraction from society.

The most disgraceful thing about drug use is that it displays a lack of respect for one's self. It is an action by which one willingly hands over their physical being to the will of a chemical substance. I have seen what drugs are capable of doing to people, and I respect my own dignity enough to resist the temptation. Whenever I am exposed to drugs within a social setting, I resist the influence by relying on a solid value system that I have spent many years constructing. Also, my own social stability has helped me set standards for my actions. I am content with the group I associate myself with, and as a

group, my friends and I hold similar values. We are able to support each other. As a cohesive unit, we can effectively resist the persuasion of alcohol and drugs.

Yet what about those that do not have a friend group to rely on?

If the main factor influencing the decision to use drugs is a desire to fit in socially, then the individuals that need the most assistance are the outcasts of the population. Action must be taken to physically go out and bind these individuals in community. As a community, we need to help other students form value systems, create friend groups, and develop self-respect. Without social contentment among students, individuals will branch out and may try to achieve this through drugs.

In order to prevent one from using alcohol or drugs, action must be taken early on to improve social situations. Simple steps can make this possible. When a younger student is isolated, I can step out and befriend them. Even simply introducing new people to each other helps develop social relations. Also, I combine my leadership qualities and genuine effort to serve as a role model with values that people respect.

High school students drink and take drugs is to fit in socially, yet the use of drugs only isolates the student further. In order to effectively battle this problem, social situations must be improved so that individuals do not feel the need to fall into the trap of drugs and alcohol. And all it takes is a genuine effort on our part. Ultimately, if social instability was not present, Sarah and Scott could be living much more noble lives right now. Instead, they live in isolated worlds. The harm that drugs can bring upon the student and the community is immense, yet is all too often silenced. It is our task to be the voice of change.

The Effects and Consequences of Drugs and Alcohol

In this day and age, it is too often that we hear about the tragic deaths of teenagers and adults as a result of drug and alcohol abuse. Every day, we read from the newspaper or hear from the television about the latest teen that died from drug overdose, or the father who died from liver disease due to alcohol abuse. For those of us that have never taken the opportunity to try illicit drugs and alcohol, it can be difficult to understand why people would willingly throw their lives away in order to get intoxicated. However, with more and more teens being swept away by addiction every day, it is critical that we can identify what drives them to use drugs and alcohol.

There are hundreds of reasons why a teenager would turn to drugs or drink alcohol. However, probably the most prominent motive that would cause one to use drugs and alcohol is the desire to be socially accepted by their peers. Adolescence, for many people, is a period of loneliness and self-consciousness. It is a period of development when a teenager wants to create the persona of how they want to appear to others. Depending on what that specific persona is, a teenager may or may not be accepted by their peers. This, undoubtedly, can be a devastating and traumatic point of the teen's life and can lead to further consequence and repercussions during adulthood. However, from the adolescent's perspective, there is a powerful alternative that the teen can take that would completely avoid such social awkwardness: conformity. In all social groups, including adolescents and young adults, there are cultural standards that individuals of the specific group must adhere to in order to be accepted by his or her peers. To defy these social standards would inevitably lead to being exiled from the social group. Because of this, it is not surprising that one could be so easily pressured into using drugs and alcohol simply because the social group says that it is "cool".

Because adolescent and young adult social groups parallel what is "cool" to what defies authority, it is a likely consequence that abusing substances that rules and laws have forbidden turns out to be what is socially accepted by younger cultural cliques, thus resulting in a large number of teenagers and young adults abusing drugs and alcohol. With the desire to be accepted by one's peers, and the lack of understanding of the consequence, teens and young adults are very vulnerable to the temptation of using drugs and alcohol. While health and drug education could employ scare tactics to discourage adolescents from using drugs, eliminating the motive for wanting to be accepted by one's peers is something that no amount of education can achieve.

Fortunately, this does not happen with every teenager. While almost everyone in a normal social environment is faced with the temptation to use drugs and alcohol, there are many adolescents and young adults today that are successful in declining the offer. Being a high school student, I am not exempt from the necessity of being accepted by a social group. During my time in high school, I have found myself, at times, to be

socially accepted by others as well as socially awkward. To impress my peers in the hopes that I could be a part of their clique, I have at one time, lied, cheated, and broken probably half a dozen school rules. However, there has never been a time that I have participated in drinking alcohol or using illicit drugs. Over the years, I have learned that those that expect me to do drugs, drink alcohol, or violate the law aren't involved with my life long enough for their opinion to matter. Instead, the people who I socialize with every day, that I have come to trust are the same people who accept me just the way I am. I find that I am able to easily resist the temptation to use drugs and drink alcohol simply because I have chosen friends that are responsible, compassionate, and would never force me to do something that is wrong. There is no cure-all for preventing teens and young adults from using drugs or abusing alcohol. Instead, growing independent of these gateways to destruction requires a life-long emotional journey for the individual. Teens need to prioritize in their life what is truly important to them, and who is truly important in their lives. In addition, they need to understand that life isn't a fairy tale, and that they will meet adversity when trying to achieve their hopes and dreams. I have found that being a part of our school newspaper, where I have met people with similar character and sense of virtue, has had a deep impact and has helped with me finding a social group that requires no standards that would violate my sense of morality. With the combination of a comprehensive education to the dangers of drugs and alcohol, encouraging an individual to join a productive club or organization, and above all, a nurturing of self-worth and appreciation by parents, educators, and community, it is likely that the number of adolescents using drugs and abusing alcohol would decrease over time. This way, the individual would understand the consequence of using drugs as well as have a social group that understands what it is like to be an adolescent from which the individual could draw support.

With each year passing, it seems that the prominence of drugs and alcohol is growing greater and greater. With the desire to be accepted by others, peer pressure can be a devastating factor. However, with the proper education, as well as finding that group of people from which one can draw support, there is hope that the drug and alcohol crisis in the world today could simply be history tomorrow.

The Beginning of Alcohol and Drug Abuse

In high schools around the nation, drug and alcohol abuse is becoming an increasingly dangerous and devastating issue. Students are often faced with the problem of whether or not to participate in consuming drugs or alcohol and then have to face the consequences of their choices. It is a hard decision for a young adult to make, but it could make an enormous difference on their future. To many young teens, high school is a scary new place full of judging people, peer pressure, and stress caused by parents and teachers, which all help create a lack of self-confidence. These are only some of the factors that influence students to drink and do drugs; the most influential being peer pressure. Kids make the choices they do to deal with social and personal problems. They need to resist making the wrong decisions by accepting themselves for who they are and following their own morals. Every teen needs a friend, family member, or even a person in society who can act as a role model for them to display how to live a happy and drug-free life. I have learned all this from my own personal experiences of being a young teen and being confronted with difficult choices to make.

When I first entered high school, I was terribly frightened. I was introduced to many new friends and felt accepted for the most part, but I extremely lacked self-esteem. Everyday I hated the way I looked and was constantly comparing myself to the other girls in my class. I felt like I had lame friends and was certainly far from being popular. Later in the year, a new acquaintance entered my life and she was enthusiastic, outgoing, and was just what I needed to make more friends. I knew she could lead to a more popular life and what I thought would be a fun life. Soon, as a result of my new friends, I began drinking and not too soon after, began smoking pot. I have to admit, I loved it at the time, not for the actual using of drugs by any means, but just for

the fact that I had numerous friends and was constantly busy with social events. However, this time in my life resulted in two trips to the hospital for alcohol poisoning and an eating disorder. Although this sounds like a horrible beginning to a high school career, it made me set my life back on track and consider my morals and the things that really mattered to me.

I learned much from my experiences; one of the most important issues I learned to deal with was accepting myself as I am. I realize now that everyone has problems and everyone is insecure in one way or another. Many teens deal with similar issues to mine by also abusing drugs and alcohol. They use it to fit in or as an outlet for another pain in their life. For me, I grew up as an extremely self-conscious young girl and brought that state of mind with me to high school. Drinking and smoking became my way to have friends and finally feel wanted. The strongest factor influencing teens to make these choices is definitely peer pressure. Although it is not always obvious at the time, it is always present in one form or another.

The only way to truly resist the persuasive qualities of drugs, alcohol, and the pressure from friends is to have a strong set of morals. Although I had a rough time in my life where I let those influences consume me, I was still holding a 4.0 GPA and respected my parents, because that was what really mattered to me. I was only following what my friends did, because I wanted to seem like I was popular. As time passed and I matured, I acknowledged that my family cared so much more for me than my friends. It is very important for teenagers to have strong family support and if that is not available, then have a strong network of friends who won't pressure them to make bad choices that conflict with their morals. Overtime, I saw through the friends that I made bad choices with. I learned to accept the fact that they were not true friends that sincerely cared for me. It is also important for teens to distinguish between true friends and fake friends. They need to ask themselves the question of if they would rather have numerous friends

with corrupt morals or be slightly less “cool” and be surrounded by peers who really care for them.

To prevent another student from following after others and getting absorbed into abusing drugs and alcohol, someone needs to be that supportive friend for them. They just need a positive influence in their life and a role model that would demonstrate, just by living their normal life, how to be happy with who they are. They need to know that they have a friend that is always there for them and honestly cares. In the end, it is the individual’s choice to make and they need to come to terms with themselves and accept their own person as they are.

Overall, high school students all have self-esteem problems at one point or another, but won’t always admit it. Everyone goes through the same problems and teens need to realize that they are all in it together. Unfortunately, many people resort to abusing drugs and alcohol for social purposes, personal pains, or pressure from the people in their lives anyways. The most influential of these on students is peer pressure from their friends, because they have such a strong need to feel wanted and accepted. Young adults are very impressionable and it is important for them to learn to make the right decisions by having a good role model in their life that is supportive. Although I have had far from a healthy past, I would never take it back. I learned that everyone is in the same situation as each other and surrounding yourself with true friends and eventually accepting yourself for who you are as a person is very important.

I'm from Oregon, where, according to The Oregonian "we live in a state that ranks fourth nationwide for alcohol-related deaths and have a drug-mortality rate that's been double the U.S. average for five years in a row." Quite honestly, this doesn't surprise me a bit. The amount of usage and abuse regarding drugs and alcohol is prevalent everywhere I look, especially in my school. Despite the endless efforts of professionals, counselors, teachers, parents and even students trying to bring awareness to this subject, a majority of students are still choosing to partake in substance abuse.

So why is it that so many students are choosing to use drugs and alcohol? This isn't an easy question for anyone to answer. There are countless reasons and often times, more than one will contribute to today's youth choosing to use drugs and alcohol. Peer pressure is one of the first things that comes to mind, but quite honestly it's not as prevalent as a lot of adults think. Of course it's there and a lot of people will ask you if you want to drink or smoke but it's really not that hard to say no and people don't necessarily look at you any differently for saying no. The bigger factors are things like not being involved in school, trying to deal with family or relationship issues, or feeling like no one cares enough to tell you to stop. When students aren't involved in school activities, it allows them a lot of "hang time" after school. In some cases it's more than three hours before parents get home from work, which is more than enough time to get high or drunk and sober up before the parents suspect a thing. Another tendency is that something traumatic happens within a student's home or to someone they love or are close to. So instead of dealing with the pain in a healthy, healing way, they decide to turn to drugs or alcohol to mask or "forget" about the pain they're feeling. This is a really dangerous path for anyone to go down especially if they never truly deal with their anger or depression and they start getting addicted to harmful substances.

There are obviously factors influencing each and every decision we make, whether it's big or small. Despite the fact that many students are choosing to drink alcohol or do drugs, there are also students who don't. Myself being one of them, it's easier to attest to the choice to stay sober. If someone has goals in their life, the more tangible they are, the less they want to do something that could jeopardize their opportunities at achieving them.

For the past 2 years I've known that I want to be a nurse and that I was going to do anything possible to get there. I just recently got accepted into a nursing program as a freshman in college starting the fall of 2009 and I couldn't be happier. But now that I'm so much closer to accomplishing what I want to do with the rest of my life it just makes it that much crazier to even consider doing drugs or alcohol. How could I partake in a "temporarily fun" activity that could ruin my entire future and everything I've worked for? I have seen the effects that drugs and alcohol can have on people very close to me. My freshman year of high school I had to move out of my house because my step-dad is physically

abusive. It was one of the most life-changing events I could've ever gone through. My step-dad had a big drinking problem and he was drunk most of the times he was abusive towards me. I hated it. I hated the alcohol, I hated his abusive behavior and I hated how my mom enabled it. I told myself that I never wanted to be like him and if it meant never drinking alcohol then so be it. All I told myself to care about was being the best person I can be and I knew alcohol wasn't going to help me. I talked to people I knew I could trust to help me through everything and I never turned to drugs or alcohol to forget about the pain I was feeling.

When it comes to drugs, I feel just as passionately. Someone very close to me smoked weed multiple times a week and despite the way I felt about it he wouldn't stop. He had so much going for him and I wanted, more than anything, for him to see what he was jeopardizing by choosing a stupid drug over his future. He was going to be a starting pitcher for varsity baseball his freshman year of college and on top of that, he was very smart. But despite my efforts, and not learning from the previous times he'd been caught, he decided to take weed to school with him when he went off to college. The dean of the school found it in his room and they suspended him from the dorms for an extended time period and he almost lost his chance to play baseball for the school. He hasn't smoked since and he's been seeing a counselor but this just further backs up my choice to not do drugs. He told me that I was right and that he still appreciates everything I've said and just being there for him. I've never liked drugs or seen the point in doing them. I don't want to risk everything I've been working for to lose it all over a substance.

The impact that drugs and alcohol can have on people and their families and friends come in all levels of devastation. I know that there are people out there who have experienced things far worse than me. But I also know that the key to helping people overcome their addictions is to not enable the behavior. If someone's doing something you know they shouldn't be or that could hurt them, say something! I know my mom didn't and she lost me because of it...you'll have to ask her if it was worth it. But I've seen first hand that by saying something, you really can be that first step changing someone's life.

“Up with hope! Down with done!”

Weed. Cigarettes. Cigars. Beer. Vodka. Tequila. Hookah. Ecstasy. Cocaine.

These are a few words I have constantly heard throughout my four years in high school. Over half of the students at my school have done some type of a drug. How do I know? I hear about it; I see it; I'm surrounded by it. There are many reasons as to why a student might choose to do drugs, the most common of which is the belief that everyone does it; it's cool; it's common; therefore it's acceptable.

Drugs are like an ecstatic light, attracting us like moths to a flame. There are many reasons why students get blinded by that light; I will attempt to explain a few. The primary attraction to drugs is simply because they are restricted. They give teenagers the sense that they are breaking the rules and crossing into the boundaries where only adults can go. It is ironic because to us drinking and smoking resembles maturity, but it makes people anything but mature. Teens also want to try drugs to be like everybody else and because of peer pressure. Other compelling reasons to do drugs are because they provide an excuse to get away with misbehaving and saying things you could not normally say. Teens also do drugs because they think drugs make situations less boring and more fun. They can do drugs just to kill time. Last but not least, I cannot leave out the effects of our dear media, which plays such a crucial role in making drugs seem like an element of everyday life. These are a few reasons as to why students are so attracted to open Pandora's box of drugs.

Now let us focus on the most compelling factor in students' decisions to do drugs: the rising belief that drugs are normal and common and because they rise your social status. I will never forget what one of my classmates that I had recently become friends with told me last year. He confessed, “Heidi, I always thought you were one of those party girls who likes to have fun, but now that I'm beginning to know you, you're not what I thought.” That really shook me up. I was literally just told that I am not a fun person because I don't party and do drugs. He did not mean to hurt my feelings, but that was what he thought of me. In his mind the association with a fun character was the

association with parties and the willingness to do drugs. In all honestly, that is the perception of many students my age. That mindset even starts developing in middle school. You are the “cool” and “edgy” kid if you smoke or drink. Plus, smoking and drinking have progressed into such a common activity that it is not even a big issue if you do it. As a matter of fact, people get surprised when I tell them I have never been drunk or smoked. I know a few students who have never smoked weed like me. However, recently one of them got suspended for ten days for showing up to our homecoming dance under the influence accompanied by fourteen others. Interesting how an innocent boy who had never smoked before suddenly would just because his friends did.

I must say that at least 90% of my friends have done some type of a drug. It is difficult to find someone who has not by their senior year. I know my friends’ good qualities, so I just try to keep away from their bad qualities and keep above the influence. My number one anti-drug is my mom. She has drilled the consequences of drugs over and over in my mind since I can remember. Whenever I am in a situation where drugs are present, I ask myself do I really want to do this? Is it worth it? Am I driving? Am I going to regret this? And so on. The other reason is that I respect my body. I am an athlete, and I rather not manipulate my precious hard working organs by infecting them with depressants and hallucinogens. Last but not least, I honestly don’t believe you need to be on something to be popular and fun. I am proud to say I have many friends; I am very social, *and* I am drug free.

Perhaps one of the greatest outcomes of my decisions to stay drug free is the effect I’ve had on my friends. They see how social and interactive I am without using drugs, and it has affected their decisions. My friends also know that I look down on drugs so when they are with me, they don’t drink or smoke. We just have fun without any drugs intensify our evening. And if we are at a party and they want to do something, I always test them with my mom’s favorite drilling questions. Do you really want to drink right now? Do you remember what that does to your body? Aren’t you driving? Those questions usually work their charm. Three of my friends even asked me to make them hemp bracelets to wear on their wrists to remind them “what Heidi would do” in a situation were drugs are present. They sometimes even tell me that they did not smoke because of me. It is too

great of a feeling to explain, the feeling that my existence is truly making a difference in their lives.

Drugs are unfortunately an unavoidable element of a teenager's life. There are many compelling reasons that attract students to smoke. However, I've learned the important thing is to be true to yourself and make the right decisions. Plus, if you are concrete in your beliefs, you might even positively affect other people's decisions.

Thank You!

Let's Stop the Madness

“More than half (58%) of 12th graders report having been drunk at least once in their life and half of teens (50%) have tried an illicit drug by the time they finish high school.” (SADD, Statistics). These are the type of statistics that parents with children do not want to hear. Why do so many teens and young adults associate themselves with drugs and alcohol at such a young age? Is it stress related? Are they just using drugs and alcohol to appear superior or “cooler” than they actually are? Teens do have to manage a great deal these days, but what is influencing their decision to take that first step? How can we help the current teens and young adults to think before doing drugs and alcohol?

Being a high school student in 2008 can be challenging. Many adults do not understand what we have to go through each day. Some parents believe our generation has it easier because we have the use of technology and new services that weren't available to them when they were younger. Today, we juggle heavy homework, athletics, extra circular activities, volunteering, a job (for most teens), and stress of college competition while trying to act our own age everyday of the week. We are not perfect individuals, and nor should we be. As we endeavor each stressful situation to the best of our abilities, there comes a point in each of our lives when we are faced with two paths. The first path is drug and alcohol free and the other path is not. These paths could potentially ease the pressure for some teens and make us feel like normal high school students or can make the situation worse by falling into the cycle of drug and alcohol abuse. The first path that we are presented with is the decision to find a hobby or sport that makes us feel like we are taken away to a new planet where we can be whoever we choose. It is important that the choice is one that can be done at any age; for me, figure skating is the path and place where I feel that anything is possible and the stress I deal with each day seems to disappear. By finding a healthy escape from stress through hobbies and sports provides teens not only an outlet but a means to lift their self esteem and confidence. The second path is the decision to do drugs and alcohol; this is a quick fix to the situation and although may provide an escape for some teens, in the end it will have devastating effects on an individual, family and friends. The key for teens is having the self confidence to choose the right path and surround themselves with family and friends that support that choice when faced with overwhelming peer pressure or stress.

Furthermore, our society likes to place a wall blocking any thoughts that are associated with the dangers of drugs and alcohol. We hear about people each week that were victims of car accidents involving drunk drivers, a drug overdose, or a teen party raided by police that had drugs and/or alcohol. Even though as teens we hear about these terrible situations, we choose to make them seem imaginary.

When it comes to teens experimenting (or just doing something their not suppose to do), it seems teens have it set in their minds that nothing awful will ever happen, that we as humans are invincible. However, statistics show that more than 40% of teens drink when they are angry or lost and 32.2 % of teens nationwide have their first drink before the age of 13. Most teens and families do not know these realities and this is partially due to the media, and society not wanting the communities we live in to know the reality about what can essentially happen to us if we do take drugs or alcohol. If the media would place more advertisements bringing awareness and statistics to teens about the facts more would be willing to listen. Another solution would be having a drug and alcohol course required in high school. We are capable of an infinite amount of possibilities to help teens and their families become more educated about the dangers of drugs and alcohol, but it seems it takes a back seat to other issues such as the economy and creating a better lifestyle.

Although we want to escape the challenges of drugs and alcohol or just pretend the problem does not exist, we as human beings have to help each other realize what we are living for, and the importance of each individual's life. We need to help encourage, inspire and persuade people that are doing drugs and alcohol that it is simply not worth risking their lives, and we can do this by talking openly and truthfully about the subject. We can't hide from the world we live in, and the challenges that we are faced with each day. Drugs and alcohol will control, destroy and ruin everything about an individual and it's just not worth it.

In Memory of Laura Mersereau

Even though we hear the word "addiction" a lot these days, the full extent of its meaning is not always understood. More and more young teens are developing addictions each day to alcohol, meth, cocaine, and other life threatening substances. As a great number of families suffer from the pain that addiction can cause, many students remain unaware of the consequences of drugs and alcohol. Substance abuse is rapidly creating a devastating impact on today's youth and society. It is time something was done to create a greater awareness.

Addiction awareness should start in a child's home and classroom. It is important that drug awareness be promoted even at a young age. No student should go unaware of the impact addiction can have on their lives, their families, and their future. Many people who become addicted to drugs or alcohol, commonly choose to experiment with them during their teen years. It is during this time when young adults are most vulnerable to pressure from their peers and the social acceptability of these substances. In many middle schools and high schools the use of drugs or alcohol is considered acceptable and even normal by a majority of students. This belief is a large contributor to the number of teens who suffer from addiction today. The struggle to become accepted is the most challenging factor influencing a student's decision. In their eyes, becoming accepted socially is weighed higher than the possibility of creating an addiction. However, becoming addicted to drugs and alcohol is not how a teen should begin their adult life. It is important that students become aware of what consequences their actions could cause.

Substance use is often hidden or masked from a student's parents and teachers. This is one reason why many students continue using into their adult lives. Parents and teachers often overlook or ignore the fact that a teen is creating an addiction, because they are unwilling to address the issue. It would be helpful if teachers and parents became more involved in promoting awareness of substance abuse among today's students. Teachers should start by taking the initiative to never ignore a situation in which a student is participating in substance use. Although many teachers desire to be the "nice guy" these students may continue along the path to addiction if nothing is done.

Many families have been torn apart due to the outcome of addiction. When someone is young and has little life experience, they struggle to realize that their addictions do not only touch them, but they also touch the people who love them most. Addiction often leads to many hardships such as broken relationships, disease, financial troubles, and even death. These are the reasons that I personally resist the temptation to experiment with drugs or alcohol. I view my life and the lives of my family and friends as too important to risk with something as powerful as addiction.

I would love to create an organization at my school that promotes alcohol and drug awareness. I believe awareness is under emphasized in our society and should be greatly improved upon. To do this, and ultimately to help prevent

other students from using drugs and alcohol, the youth of our generation needs to have the opportunity to learn about the devastating effects of addiction from individuals who have suffered from addiction themselves. The most effective people to talk with students would be influential people who work with addicts in the medical field, law enforcement, drug counselors, or family members of users. Listening to their stories and advice may help the students to imagine themselves in that situation to discover that addiction could very well interfere with their path to a successful life. Students would learn through the mistakes of others.

Although having speakers come to talk with students would be a good way to reach out and promote drug and alcohol awareness, the ideal way would be for students to work together among their peers in a special interest group. Student run programs should be created within the school where students passionate about drug and alcohol prevention could be available to help other students in need of support. This group could also be responsible to inspire others to band together in the hopes of creating awareness among their school and their community. After learning of substance abuse in their homes and schools, hopefully more young people will realize that perhaps drugs and alcohol may not be the best answer to becoming socially accepted.

Not everyone can be convinced that the amount of addiction occurring today is a large problem in our society. However, there are hundreds, perhaps thousands of families around the world who have lost loved ones to addiction. In memory of those like Laura who have lost their lives, a greater attempt to better educate our young generation must be made. It should become possible for anyone and everyone's voice to be heard and promote awareness of substance abuse. All students should have the chance to make the right decisions in their lives, and should not be allowed to unknowingly choose to live a life they can not control...the life of an addict.

Itching, hiding, secrets, lying, ashamed, regretting, hurting, done. A teen's life could end in an instant if drugs or alcohol take over their life. Teens do drugs and drink to fit in, to be like their celebrity role model, or to fill a part of their lives that is gone because of problems due to personal, social, academic or other issues. As a junior in high school, I have realized it is important to have a positive role in your high school, and to do what you can to stay drug and alcohol free.

High school is a crazy and fun place that is a new experience for everyone that starts it. It can be overwhelming with all the new students, more of a multi classroom environment, and trying to find where to fit in. Some students choose sports, others clubs, and some theater. Every teen student has a decision they need to make in their lifetime; the choice to do drugs and drink alcohol, or the choice to not. Although it may not be directly brought up, these substances are always present and around every student that goes to high school. Many students think that everyone else is doing it so why not they. Their mind thinks, "if there are popular kids drinking, then maybe if I drink, I'd have something to talk about with them the next day that would make me just a little bit closer to being their friend and accepted." Teens strive to be like everyone else and be well received by a certain group of peers.

The media also plays an enormous role in getting teens to drink and do drugs. Commercials, television shows, and movies portray drinking as a way to relax, unwind, and be glamorous all at the same time. The message is that drinking is what everyone whose "cool" does at gatherings, social events, or parties and in order for you to be cool you need to drink too. Many celebrities struggle with substance abuse, but to teens who look up to these celebrities and want to be exactly like them, drugs appear "in", and something they should consider to be like the role model they see in the movies and in television. When actors and actresses on T.V. take drugs or drink, it's as if all their worries go away and they're stress free. A magical substance that could take stress away would be a miracle to a teenager in high school if there were no consequences. The media shows the short burst of positive effects a person falsely feels when taking drugs or

drinking, but never shows what happens afterwards. This would definitely influence a teen to experiment with drugs or to drink at a party.

The most challenging factor influencing the decision to drink or do drugs is whether or not teens feel like their life is complete and satisfied in the current time. If a teen does not have many friends, then maybe if they turn to drugs, more people will like them. If life is too stressful, maybe drinking at tonight's party will make the teen stop thinking about everything they were worrying about. If there are problems at home, maybe getting high will make the teen forget everything that happened today. The bottom line is, substance abuse and drinking is a way for teens to fill in a gap they feel they have. They don't rationalize to think of another way to fix their problem because drugs and alcohol seem so easy. They're everywhere, they're accessible, and they're accepted by certain kids at school. It's the perfect option right? Wrong.

Although there are drugs and alcohol in the world, most teens resist them. I have a great family and wonderful friends. They are huge parts in me not thinking about drugs or drinking. I focus very hard on my academics, which makes me very oriented towards my success in my classes. I'm on my school's varsity tennis team, am involved in French club, piano, and just started participating in my school's theater program. I have found a place in my school where I feel comfortable and happy. My after school activities are incredible stress relievers. When I play in a tennis match, all my energy is going towards a game, and nothing else matters. When I finish, regardless if I win or lose, I have a feeling in my heart that is very full of life and positive that I say is probably an infinity-times better than the feeling of drinking or getting high, and it only has positive side effects.

In order to prevent other teens from drinking and doing drugs, I think it needs to become more aware that the majority of teens do not drink or use drugs. This will get people to realize that if they do drugs or drink alcohol, they really are not being like everyone else and are only hurting themselves. I can be there for my friends and I can support my peers when they are having hard times so they can talk things out. I will always be there to listen and help them so they do not resort to other means such as alcohol and drugs to solve their problems. As a member in my school, I can talk with the leadership group in my school to promote launching more attacks on teen substance

abuse and underage drinking by putting up posters and having it be talked about in our Advisory classes. It would be a good idea to do surveys of what teens at my school actually think about their peers who drink or do drugs to show that most people do not find these traits "cool". The consequences of drinking and drugs need to be known throughout high schools to prevent teens from going down this unsafe path that could destroy their lives forever.

Drinking and doing drugs as a teenager may be the worst choice someone can make in the early years of becoming an adult. No matter what the reason is for doing it, whether it's to be accepted, to resemble a celebrity, or to fix a problem, it is the wrong choice to make. Although I am only one person, and I am a teenager, I can stand up for what I believe in, that teenage drinking and substance abuse need to be stopped and prevented. Knowledge about these topics is the key to not trying and experimenting with them in the first place. The word needs to be spread that drinking and doing drugs really does ruin a teen's life.