

Laura Mersereau Memorial Award Essay

Although the current legal drinking age in the United States is 21 years old, alcohol has become the most used and abused drug throughout the United States, killing a large number of teenagers over the years. My family and I live in Boring, a small rural town outside of Portland, Oregon. There I have seen the devastating effects of drinking and driving on our local highway.

As a senior in high school and one that has chosen to personally not drink, I have witnessed alcohol consumption and abuse at school functions such as Prom, various Athletic Events, and even consumption during school.

One factor that may contribute to a teenager consuming alcohol and drugs is their desire for acceptance –good ol’ fashioned peer pressure. Peer pressure is a tough part of a teenager’s life, and many teens give in to the tension for that short moment of admiration. Another reason could be the teenager’s need for control. Some are perceived to live the “perfect life” as seen through the eyes of others. Their parents have planned out their whole lives for them, and control everything. This strict parenting then leads to rebellion; the need to have control over some aspect in their life, much like the teenagers who battle with an eating disorder.

In my seventeen years, I have seen what alcohol can do to people, and it really scares me. A dear friend of mine was an innocent victim of alcohol. She and her husband went out drinking, and when they returned to their home, he got tough and she got brave. She had wanted to leave him, and end the relationship. Their dispute ended with the loss of both their lives. Her husband killed her, and then himself. I will never

forget the moment that I found out; I was horrified. When you drink alcohol, it plants an angry monster that makes you into something you are not.

I know that alcohol can damage friendships and families. My grandfather, who was an alcoholic, put a strain on the relationship between my grandmother and the rest of the family. Since he drank all of the time, you could never tell when you were seeing the “real grandpa Jim.” It was hard to talk to him, and we were all afraid of him. Why would you do this to yourself? Your friends? Your family? I just don’t get it.

I know of kids at my high school who consume alcohol on weekends. At our high school, every spring right before Prom, the Gresham Police and ASB Student Council hold a SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) program, to prevent kids from drinking and driving. Twenty kids are picked to dress in Grim Reaper robes, and are seen as “dead” to the rest of the school; graves are set up, memory boxes and displays, and we also have an assembly that is like a funeral. A mock car crash is set up outside the school, with some of the kids acting as the victims in the crash. I have attended and watched this event since my freshman year, and it has impacted me deeply every time. In order to convince a student not to drink, I would encourage them to come and experience the SADD Program. It is a wake up call to anyone who thinks that they are indestructible.

For me, personally, I am more than comfortable in my skin and proud of who I am. I do not feel the need to drink alcohol in order for people to like me, or to improve my self-image. I would hope that I could share my self confidence and reach out to someone who feels the temptation of giving in to peer pressure.

Laura Mersereau Essay Contest

I am a child of an alcoholic. I am also a high school senior with a GPA of 3.82, with a rank of 18 in my class of 385; have played on many sports teams, and have been involved with multiple organizations. My peers and my teachers have no idea that I've grown up with an alcoholic father, yet this piece of my life has influenced all my decisions. My father was raised in the Portland, area and in his high school years, he started engaging in alcohol and drug. Although he did not intend for addiction, his high school introduction to these substances caused him to be addicted for life. Due to this addiction in my family, my life has been changed; therefore, it is my duty to share my story with current peers to prevent them from engaging in substance abuse.

As a result of the various pressures of adolescence, teenagers are the most susceptible to addiction. Many high school students drink and do drugs because of the pressures being forced on them: family pressure, school pressure and peer pressure. Although peer pressure may seem cliché, it is the biggest factor that influences today's teens to use or not use these substances. Last year I was faced with a situation that involved peer pressure. I was invited to a party, and prior to attending the event, I heard that a popular senior said he was going to get me "wasted." I knew this was not a good predicament. I decided not to go because I knew that many of my peers would be pressuring the "good girl" to drink or do drugs. This "good girl" reputation may have sacrificed my spot in the popular party crowd, but I think of my father and I know it is well worth the sacrifice. Peer pressure, and other pressures are the reasons why high school students fall down the path toward addiction in their teenage years. They may not intend to become addicted, but this early introduction to using can cause lifelong addictions. My father is a living

example of the consequences of early introduction to drugs and alcohol, considering that he is an alcoholic to this day.

Since my father is an alcoholic, I have not had a “normal” father figure in my life. Due to this lack of parenting I am repulsed by having a connection with the popular party crowd. If I were to follow the party lifestyle it could cause major consequences on my future children. Furthermore I resist the lure of peer pressure by surrounding myself with positive influences that also have a “good” reputation. If I could prevent another student from using alcohol and drugs, I would first have to step outside my circle of good friends and reach out to others who are contemplating using substances. The next step would be to open up and tell them my story in hopes of preventing them from substance abuse; I would invite them to hang out with my group of friends, and show them how to have a good time without being in an altered state. I am willing to open up to others because I do not want my peers to go down the path that my father did in high school. I have overcome the effects of my upbringing and I am a positive role model because of it.

A middle school student named Jane was a talented and enthusiastic person. Throughout her life, she always aspired to become a singer. Her melodic voice was able to transform a vehement atmosphere into an area of peace and serenity. However, talent was not enough for her. What she desired most of all, was to become part of a popular clique at her school. In order to do so, she chose to drink alcohol. This fatal decision soon turned into an addiction. It devoured her body, consuming her mind and aspirations. In just a brief moment, the addiction took a toll on her life at only 14 years old.

Jane's death at such an early age is jarring tale for anyone to hear. But perhaps the most devastating facet of this account, is that Jane could be anyone. She could have been a friend, a classmate, a daughter, and as seen through Laura Mersereau, a sister. Substance abuse is an ailment in which plagues the youth of America. Thousands of adolescents succumb into this growing disease each year. As the illness continues to escalate, it diminishes the lives of victims and their families. Adolescents can quickly become drug users because they face the powerful need to gain acceptance each day. Despite many obstacles, there is still hope. First and foremost, substance abuse should not be seen as a health issue, but rather a social dilemma. Peers remain the most influential people among adolescents, therefore they play a key role in solving the issue of substance and alcohol abuse. The entire student population must stand tall against this epidemic. With everyone working together as a whole, victory would be inevitable.

Alcohol and substance abuse can destroy perfect families in the blink of an eye. As I walk through my Portland neighborhood each week, seemingly average homes pass me by. Each home lives a blissful family who meticulously works to make ends meet. It never occurs to me that one perfect house in particular, lives a family who struggles with their young son's cocaine addiction. His parents work tirelessly to fight this devastating and unforeseen event. Their

efforts are amiable, but the sorrow on their faces is evident. His mother is a living wound, and his father is no longer the ebullient neighbor everyone greets each day. As I witness their sufferings, I begin to realize that drugs do not only affect those who consume it, but it also inflicts deep pain on each of his or her family members as well. The news of his addiction is quite a surprise. No one suspects that a drug addict could emerge from this quiet honor student. It is hard to believe that such an astonishing person would sell his life to the dark underworld of substance abuse. Soon enough, I discover that he uses cocaine in order to alleviate his pain of being an outsider in school. In his perspective, cocaine allows an escape from reality. To my realization, the changing world seems to fall down on teenagers too quickly, as they are constantly balancing school, family, and social activities in their lives. As a result, adolescents attempt to discover solutions that relieve emotional, physical, or mental agony. For some of us, these feelings can become incredibly intense, to the point where we feel a momentary escape by using drugs or alcohol is our best and only option.

By examining this boy's addiction to cocaine and Jane's addiction to drinking, I firmly believe that the need for acceptance is the chief influence behind the decision to consume drugs or alcohol. The boy desires to gain social acceptance at school, whereas Jane longs to be accepted by her peers as a more popular person. It is human instinct to yearn for acceptance, therefore resisting peer pressure is challenging. The intense desire for acceptance is simply too powerful. Even so, there are two steps to withstand peer pressure. First, we must remind ourselves that everyone has insecurities, and perfection is merely a myth. Seeking ways to make ourselves more confident is a first step, but it is still not enough. We must also respect our peers. I often hear the phrase, "treat others the way you would like to be treated," but it seems to be ignored. All of us must do *both* steps in order to ensure acceptance among everyone. To do one

step without the other, would result in sheer selfishness and ignorance.

In order to reduce substance abuse, I also strongly urge for young people to form a student-led organization that focuses mainly on creating solutions to end this epidemic. Enthusiastic and passionate young leaders in this organization have the opportunity to prevent substance and alcohol abuse by directly creating and implementing ideas. These thoughts could include interactive lectures, games, or inviting former drug addicts to speak with Oregon schools. The ideas are endless. An emphasis on substance abuse would not only teach adolescents about the consequences of consuming drugs, but it also influences them to become volunteers as well. When more young volunteers participate in this organization, more innovative solutions are able to flourish.

The youth holds more power in their hands than they could ever deem possible. By seeing their involvement in community services, I have witness the effort, sincerity, and integrity of young individuals who are willing to contribute to a cause greater than themselves. Their successes are incredible. If individual students are able to accomplish great success on their own, imagine what a powerful synergy they can create by coming together. Substance abuse cannot cease to exist without the willingness to abate peer pressure within our community. As American icon, Benjamin Franklin once stated, "we must all hang together, or assuredly, we shall all hang separately." Partition weakens all of us as a whole. Unity on the other hand, enables us to abolish the cruelty of substance and alcohol abuse; an elimination that can last for both the world of today and the future of tomorrow.

Laura Mersereau Memorial Award Essay Contest

“That sucks that you live in Gresham! It’s a druggie city! It’s ghetto, kids drink, etc...”

These are the general responses that I would get when I tell people where I live; and the more I thought about it, the more I start to agree with these statements. Teenagers are constantly getting arrested for having illegal drugs; methamphetamine labs are being found every day, and kids are getting injured or even killed due to incidents linked with alcohol...right in the city that I live in! Although high school is a big change for all teens, it gives no good explanation for why teens do drugs and alcohol: they don’t even understand that they’re hurting everybody around them.

There are plenty of students like me who are above the influence who can actually do something about the drinking and drug problem, but many of us don’t know how to.

My school, Centennial High, is known for having many students who drink and do drugs. About half of my friends drink and do drugs, and I am very fortunate that nothing has happened to them. Other people aren’t so lucky. Last summer, many students from Centennial were at a party that involved alcohol; and the party resulted in a death of a former student due to alcohol abuse. These students never think about the consequences of the poison that they are taking in until it’s too late. They also never think about all the people they are hurting. First of all, their chances of influencing their other friends to drink and do drugs are very high; which would ruin the lives of others. Second, it has a big emotional affect on families and friends. The student would start performing poorly in school. They could also get addicted, go broke, and stealing from their friends and their parents. No parent wants their kids to do drugs or alcohol; it would

crush their heart, let alone hurt them financially. Lastly, they could be hurting people they don't even know. Many automobile accidents in Gresham are a result from drinking; and it seems like it's always the innocent person who gets injured or killed.

If there are so many consequences to drinking and doing drugs, why are so many high school students still doing it? Yes, I believe that it does have to do with peer pressure, but I think that peer pressure only plays a small part. High school is probably the biggest change for all of us teenagers. You jump from being sheltered in middle school to high school where they suddenly hand you all of the responsibilities. It's a new place, with new people, and it's a place where you find yourself, know who your real friends are, and you start making choices that will impact the rest of your life. High school can be very overwhelming; it is a stressful time where many students can enter a depression when they feel like they're losing their friends, feel like they can't control anything, or they just feel like there's nothing to look forward to. The thought of college can also discourage many students; especially the students who feel like they don't have the grades or the money to get in. These students feel like they have no future; and would then resort to substances that they heard would make them feel good. They just want that high from a drug, or they want to pass out from alcohol so they can forget about their problems. Most students do that, thinking that they would never get addicted. No one thinks that they will get addicted; but in reality they do, and by that time, it's too late.

I feel like there are many ways to prevent high school students from doing drugs or alcohol. First off, I think a big reason why I don't do them is because I was educated about drug and alcohol abuse in health class. But then again, I didn't learn deeply about this until my sophomore year, and by that time, it could be too late for a lot of students: they could've started their freshman year. I think schools should rethink their programs and educate us on this stuff

during our freshman year or even 8th grade. Just one person could make a difference too. As a freshman, I had a lot of upper class friends, and many of them drank. They invited me to parties but I did my own thing instead. I stuck to what I believed in, and I told them straight up that I thought drugs and alcohol are bad and it ruins lives. Instead, I involved my life around sports, activities, and I got straight A's in all of my classes. I started helping my friends with homework; and as we got closer I noticed changes in my friends. They started coming up to me all proud of themselves and telling me that they haven't drank in 5 months. I was very proud of them too, and it seemed to excite them even more. I even got a letter from one of my friends saying how thankful he was to have met me because I made him a better person. That year, he quit drinking, and his grades went from C's to A's. This is just one example that hit me: I *can* make an impact.

These high school students are good kids. They all have goals for their future, and I'm sure none of them involve drinking or taking drugs. It's just that under all the pressure and change, they feel like they have no other choice. If they could just realize how badly they are hurting the others around them, they wouldn't do it. But from my experience, I realized that one single student could make a change, a difference; and maybe just by lending a hand, and showing others that they care, that student can prevent someone else from starting the use of alcohol and drugs.

Alcohol and drug abuse becomes a horrible addiction. Many high school students start to drink or take drugs for pleasure. This is because many students have a strong desire for a great sense of bliss. They think alcohol and drugs are the only few elements that can provide satisfaction to them, and therefore they decide to follow this dark path. Resisting the influence of drugs and alcohol is by knowledge, and prevention is by spreading the knowledge. This will avoid the creation of addiction, which is critical to not ruin a beautiful life.

Sustaining life is most meaningful, useful, and worthwhile. With existence, you are able to fulfill and achieve the purpose of life. However, many people are induced to ending it early. Many high school students do not think of the future, but only the present. When they do this, they do not know the true identity of alcohol and drugs. They know they will receive pleasure from these substances, but they do not understand that it is a temporary effect, which becomes very harmful to their future. Yet, they also believe that substance abuse is the only way of obtaining life's pleasures. This shows that awareness is truly necessary for these students. They must realize it is only a temporary pleasure with a long-term harm of addiction. They must also recognize that there are many other alternatives for enjoyment, such as sports, dancing, singing, building, and many other hobbies. When they are finally aware, they can make the right decision when the choice is upon them. Thus, spreading the news is the way for prevention. When the warning is spread out, and students have alertness about the use of these substances, prevention is displayed because resistance is created. Resistance relies on prevention because prevention gives the power to the resistance. For insistence, it is like giving a sword to a knight. With the sword, the knight can fight off the evil. In the case of alcohol and drugs, it gives knowledge to fight off the temptation of use. Everybody must help reveal the truth. This prevention will save a large amount people from making the wrong decision, which they will be very thankful for in the future.

Alcohol and drug abuse can be greatly reduced. Though, people who already know the consequences must share their insight. Prevention lets everybody understand that harmful substances are not the way of life. This awareness brings resistance to the mind, knowing that it will bring only a short pleasure feeling, and that it will produce destructive long-lasting effects. Many high school students' yen for pleasure, thus they take drugs and alcohol. However, they just do not know what this will lead up to in their future. Therefore, we must actively spread the truth before its too late. Many will fall to addiction if nothing is done, but if we do something, we can create a great power of resistance in everybody. Everybody deserves to live an accomplished and fulfilled life, thus our responsibilities is to stop the people from steering away from this path.

There's a party tonight, I'll just go and not drink, or if I do it will only be a little but. Just this one time. Nothing "that" bad will happen. My friend's parents let them drink. I can't be the only uncool one to say no. All of these excuses go through the minds of teenagers almost every weekend. It's because of these excuses that so many young adults end up abusing alcohol or drugs, or worse dead. Drug and alcohol abuse is a major social issue in American society and needs to be understood in order to keep teens safe. To get to the root of every problem all factors must be uncovered, addressed, and understood. The biggest problem today is the mindset of many teenagers and their parents, thinking that drinking every weekend or smoking pot occasionally does no harm, it's all apart of growing up. There is nothing smart or says that people respect themselves or others when they use drugs and alcohol. Lives, relationships, and futures are destroyed. The fight against alcohol and drug abuse starts by saying no and sticking to it. If communities come together and stand up for this issue, the battle of drug and alcohol abuse will be won.

High school students in the Gresham - Portland area are spending their weekends in each others basements playing beer pong and taking shots. Teenagers are getting alcohol poisoning, getting in fights, and receiving M.I.P.'s. Each year the drops out rates are increasing and grades are decreasing. Children are watching their older siblings and parent's abuse alcohol and drugs while subconsciously they believe that type of behavior is acceptable. Using drugs or alcohol is like gambling with your life and the lives of others. If so many bad things can happen why do high school students drink or do drugs? Getting these substances is way too easy and no one ever says no. All it takes is a call to an older friend or family member, or a shoulder tap to a complete stranger and alcohol is in the hands of underage kids. High school students drink or take drugs because no one tells them they're wrong for doing so. This problem can be rooted back to parents who are allowing drinking parties to occur in their homes. If parents are saying it's ok there are no positive role models to talk to kids about the devastating effects of alcohol and drugs. Alcohol and drugs are way too accessible and until adults start saying no, teenagers are going to keep saying yes to temptations.

The most challenging factor in underage drug and alcohol abuse in the Gresham - Portland area is the fact that the overall opinion on this matter is that it's normal, no big deal, and acceptable behavior, society is in denial. Back in the teenage years of our parents, using alcohol or drugs was wrong and shamed. The people who did those things were looked down upon and society told them they were wrong and that behavior was not acceptable. Today it seems as though everyone has stopped caring and no longer looks toward the future. People are getting away without consequences so they develop abusive alcohol and drug habits. When my older brother was 18 he chose to drive himself and friends to an underage house party where they engaged in drinking and smoking pot. On their way home early the next morning, my brother drove off the road, killing his friend and seriously injuring him and the other survived passengers. He was charged with reckless driving and vehicular homicide, but was able to get the charges dropped and served no punishment. Having no consequences was the worst thing that could've happened to my brother because he didn't learn his lesson. At this very moment he is sitting in the Washington County Jail with three DUI's and a prescription drug addiction. I firmly believe if there would've been consequences in the beginning he could've turned his life around and not be where he is today. Instead he thought he could keep drinking

and using drugs because he was always going to get away with it. That is the type of mindset many of today's youth have. It is time to start cracking down and face the fact that the majority of people today have a problem and need help.

Resisting this influence is one of the greatest challenges American youth face. Overcoming it takes a lot of inner strength and the support of others. The best way for teens to avoid alcohol and drugs is to simply not put themselves in that type of environment. It's extremely hard to be the only person out of a group of friends who does not drink or do drugs, but there are people out there who don't. Teens who want to fight the influence need to surround themselves with positive people who want success, or get involved in school activities that take up the extra free time and monitor teens. To prevent other students from using, be the one to say no and tell your friends that you care about them and that they can do better. If you see a friend using stand up to them, it's better to have them mad at you for the night than hurt or dead.

The fight against alcohol or drug abuse begins with one relatable person to teens who is not afraid to speak out for the sake of others. Until society develops the mind set that underage drinking and doing drugs is not acceptable, communities will continue to have youth abuse problems. Today's teenagers do have abuse issues and the sooner they see that as reality the better off our futures will be.