



January 5, 2009

Incentives promote alcohol education

SCSU, business aim to prevent tragedies

*By David Unze
dunze@stcloudtimes.com*

The drunk who assaulted an employee caused Denise Brigham to close her store and attend court hearings for the suspect.

The drunk who knocked the electrical meter off her store wall caused the compressors to fail and the food to spoil and led to hours of work assessing damages for insurance purposes.

And then there are the times she's visited employees in detox.

Brigham, owner of two Subway stores on or near the St. Cloud State University campus, rattles off the ways that alcohol abuse has impacted her businesses. It's those experiences that prompted her to give up to \$25,000 in Subway gift cards as incentives for young adults to attend a university program teaching the dangers of excessive drinking.

Brigham pledged up to 5,000 of the \$5 gift cards for anyone who takes the UChoose program. UChoose has been optional for St. Cloud State students who don't have any disciplinary offenses and required for some who do.

"This to me was a no-brainer. I think it's phenomenal, any time you can educate people," Brigham said. "Because everything seems like fun at the time, and then all of a sudden you turn around and something tragic has happened."

Trying to prevent a tragedy is at the heart of a grant request that St. Cloud State is sending to the U.S. Department of Education. The university hopes to get as much as \$250,000 over two years to spread the message about the dangers of high-risk drinking. Rob Reff, counselor and professor in St. Cloud State's Counseling and Psychological Services Office, recently outlined the grant proposal to St. Cloud City Council members and received their support for the program.

It comes at a time when at least three St. Cloud State students in the year's first semester registered blood-alcohol levels between 0.38 and 0.45, the latter student not breathing and being taken to St. Cloud Hospital's emergency room.

"The only reason those people are alive is the intervention of their friends, in one case just in time," said St. Cloud State President Earl H. Potter III. "There's a tip of the iceberg. The iceberg is the people whose judgment is impaired, who get in situations that they shouldn't be in, whose studies suffer, whose relationships suffer. That's the iceberg."

In the first semester this year, the university had more students attend the alcohol education program than all of last year, Reff said. The goal behind the \$250,000 grant request is to expand the education programming to students who live off-campus and to St. Cloud Technical College students.

Reff hopes more local businesses and property managers partner with the university to educate young people about responsible drinking and the perils of high-risk behaviors involving alcohol and drugs.

"For me, it's a win-win," Reff said. "Dangerous alcohol behavior hurts the campus and the off-campus and the properties."

Self-reported data from students who participated in the university's alcohol education program showed a reduction in the blood-alcohol levels of students who drink, he said. The education is important because many students haven't been told how alcohol can affect them so quickly and often find out the hard way.

The number of students who drink to excess is a smaller percentage of the student population, Potter said, and few get into life-threatening situations. But one is too many, he said.

"When we come close once, it has to say this is too important not to make a community priority," Potter said. "It's not a St. Cloud State problem, it's a community problem. These are our kids. They don't start this behavior when they come to us, and you've got to ask questions about 'Where does this come from?'"

It doesn't come just from St. Cloud State students. Statistics from this year's move-in day show that 41 percent of citations issued were for current St. Cloud State students, while 36 percent were issued to people with no past or current affiliation to the university.

Potter praised the students who helped save the lives of others who had too much to drink. He has told students that they won't be disciplined if they help another student in need, even if the good Samaritan is underage and also has been drinking. That could change, though, if that good Samaritan has repeat contacts involving alcohol, he said.

Brigham has worked with and mentored outstanding St. Cloud State students, she said, and she knows there are far more good apples than bad ones on campus.

"Maybe we can make more of those (good) kids out of the kids that might waffle because of the information that they'll be given (in Reff's program)," she said.

She already had helped Reff by donating other prizes for his alcohol education events on campus when he called before Christmas to tell her about the federal grant he was seeking. She liked the grant proposal and the fact that Reff isn't pushing a message of abstinence.

"The thing that I loved about this is that he's not saying 'Don't drink.' I love that. I'm not saying don't drink. You're not talking to the Temperance League here," she said. "I think drinking is fine, just don't take anybody out when you do it."

When Reff described his goals, Brigham asked a question.

"I told Rob to give me a number. In a perfect world, how many students do you want to educate over the life of this grant?" she said. "And he said 5,000. I said 'That's your number?' And he said 'That's too high, and you can't do that.' But you know what, why do it halfway? If you're going to do it, do it. I don't do things well halfway."

Reff hopes to hear back on the grant request early this year. If successful, it would be another expansion of his UChoose program, which already gained national attention when a landlord made attendance at the program a condition of leasing at his properties.

"I liked the idea, I liked the grant, I liked the title," Brigham said of UChoose. "You live with your choices for a long time. And those choices often are made in about three seconds."
