

The Bucks  
County Herald  
October 25, 2006

# Two out of three teens don't drink

## "Social Norms" campaign spreads positive message

Joe Ferry

Being a "glass is half full" kind of guy, Lee Rush found a reason to be encouraged after 35 percent of teenagers who attend public schools in Upper Bucks County said they drink alcohol.

"That means 65 percent don't," said Rush, executive director of justCommunity, the non-profit agency coordinating activities for the Upper Bucks Communities Healthy Youth Coalition that sponsored the survey of about 3,000 middle school and high school students in Pennridge, Quakertown and Palisades.

In fact, Rush was so pleased with the numbers that his group is spearheading the first ever regional "Social Norms" marketing campaign to change the perception among adults and youth that most teenagers drink. On Monday, at a news conference in Quakertown to announce the results of the groundbreaking survey, dozens of high schoolers wore bright green t-shirts proclaiming "2outta3 don't drink!"

"We're pushing the positive," said Rush.

Alcohol use among teens was just one category contained in the 2006 Student Support Card unveiled Monday at the James Michener Library before dozens of community leaders. Based on answers given by eighth-, tenth- and twelfth-graders about their attitudes and

behaviors related to alcohol, drug and tobacco use, the scorecard is meant to give a snapshot of "what life is like for young people in this community," according to Lois Dodson, head of the coalition.

Students were first surveyed between 2002 and 2004 to provide a baseline for comparison. A new group of students completed the survey in 2005 and 2006.

Among the reasons to celebrate, according to the scorecard:

- A 15 percent decrease in the use of tobacco among 12th graders;
- A five percent decrease in alcohol use by 10th graders;
- A 44 percent decrease in tobacco use by eighth-graders.

However, the scorecard also lists reasons to "stay connected," including:

- The average age of first-time use of alcohol in the region is 12.8 years;
- 11 percent of local youth have made at least one suicide attempt in their lifetime;
- Tobacco, alcohol, marijuana and inhalant use in upper Bucks remains above national averages;
- Inhalant abuse by eighth graders remains high and 20 percent above national averages;
- Only 20 percent of youth feel they are valued by their community;
- 31 percent feel sad or depressed at least some of the time.

While the coalition has had

national and state surveys available for study, Rush said the local data gives a clearer picture of what needs to be done in the Bucks County communities.

"We wanted to find out what risks were unique to our area," he said.

Jack Claypoole, administrator of the federal Drug Free Communities Program, lauded the coalition for "saving lives" by providing youngsters with the support they need. He also announced the coalition will receive a \$75,000 mentoring grant - one of only 17 in the country and the only one in Pennsylvania - to help the Lower Merion community launch a similar program.

"The Upper Bucks HCHY coalition is a leading example of the successes of the national drug free community coalition effort," said Claypoole. "The accomplishment in pushing back against drug use here in Pennsylvania is not only exciting, but puts the coalition at the forefront of a nationwide trend of reduced youth drug use. Through today's additional funding, Upper Bucks HCHY will have the opportunity to mentor another Pennsylvania community, helping to replicate the same success they themselves have experienced."

Also at the news conference, retiring Quakertown assistant superintendent James Newcomer was presented with the "Asset Champion Award" for his work with youngsters in the community.