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Town grads allowed 10 drinks at party

BY LANA HAIGHT, THE STARPHOENIX JUNE 6, 2009

As high school graduation approaches, some people are asking what's safe about "safe grad" parties.

"Having 10 drinks in one evening would not be safe for many," said Colleen Dell, research chair in substance abuse in the sociology department at the University of Saskatchewan.

Next weekend, some parents of Lanigan Central High School graduates will host a "safe grad" party at an undisclosed location. Graduates planning to attend the Saturday night drinking party had to submit a form signed by their parents in advance of the party. The graduates had to pre-order and pre-pay for the alcohol they'll drink during the 9 p.m. to 2 a.m. party. Graduates and their guests, who have to be in Grade 10 or higher, will be allowed up to 10 drinks, including beer, vodka, rum and rye.

"That boggles the mind," said Diane Fontaine, president of the Saskatoon and area Mothers Against Drunk Driving. "It's pretty scary."

Having that many alcoholic drinks at one time is considered binge drinking, says Dell, who added the definition of binge drinking is five or more drinks.

"The idea of safe grad is around drinking and driving and keeping people alive," she said.

"Is that really the goal we want for our kids -- is to simply keep them alive?"

She worries the party will be the start of a drinking pattern that continues through the summer. The dangers of binge drinking include alcohol poisoning, violence and unprotected sex.

Coralea MacDonald, whose daughter will not be attending the party even though she is graduating, was surprised to learn of the "safe grad."

"It's illegal for anyone under 19 to drink alcohol," she said. "How can we do something illegal legally?"

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Police are aware that "safe grad" parties happen in communities throughout Saskatchewan.

"The model that I'm referring to talks about where there is a parent or guardian on-site and they are making a decision, as the parent or guardian, for their child, in terms of whether or not they are going to provide them alcoholic beverages at that specific time, in that specific location, at a private place," explained RCMP Sgt. Brian Jones.

"It is an arrangement between private property owners and parents and guardians of those people in attendance. It's a private function on private land. Whether it's a good idea or not is not for us to decide," he said.

Allowing the graduates to drink large quantities of alcohol, even if they aren't driving, sets a bad example, says Fontaine, who adds MADD promotes drinking responsibly, which means adults drinking moderate amounts and then not driving.

"We don't like 'safe grads' because there is still drinking and it encourages underage drinking," said Fontaine.

MacDonald is disappointed parents are organizing the drinking party.

"As adults, I don't think we should say, 'Go for it and we'll watch you get drunk.'

"We're not trying to ruin everyone's fun," said MacDonald, who wishes the teenagers could celebrate their graduation without having to drink alcohol.

Officially, Lanigan graduates will celebrate with a ceremony and dinner on June 12, the day before the "safe grad." The school staff members are not involved in the "safe grad," says Ken Sogge, communications director for Horizon school division.

"They are illegal," he said in an interview.

"If parents choose that that's how they are going to celebrate the graduation of their child or their student, there's really nothing anybody can do about it."

One of the parents involved in the "safe grad" had no comment when contacted by The StarPhoenix and said none of the parent organizers wanted to be interviewed about the party.

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