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Drinking in Darien: Former School Resource Officer James Palmieri's Perspective

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Drinking by teenagers in Darien is a subject Darien Police Detective James Palmieri has run across quite a bit in his eight years with the department. He recently concluded 4 1/2 years as school resource officer at Darien High School.

Here's what he had to say at a panel discussion Monday at Darien Library after a showing of "Haze," a documentary film [about binge drinking among teens](#) and young adults.

Palmieri had a lot to say about the attitudes of many Darien parents who he's spoken with, and what he's seen involving teenage drinking, including the death of a teenager.

Palmieri represents the department on the Thriving Youth Task Force, one of the organizers of Monday night's event. He's also a trainer for the state's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee, teaching a program called "Effective Interactions Between School Staff and Police" to educators around the state and country.

His comments on the panel were in response to questions asked by organizers of the event and from the audience. Each response is separated from the others below with horizontal lines. In some cases below, we've omitted the questions. We're publishing them here, nearly in full, except where our recording didn't pick up all the words or, occasionally, a sentence strayed slightly off topic. We expect to publish comments from the other two panelists, as well, in a separate article:

***Question:** How can we teach our children to let us know about friends who are engaging in risky behaviors without our kids feeling like they're ratting their friends out?*

Answer:

That's obviously a tough question to answer, but I think, guys, not to beat a dead horse, but I think this is potentially the result of not intervening, so I mean, it's easy for me to say you've got to weigh the consequences there, versus feeling like a rat.

But, something that I can tell you, something that you're not going to read in the newspapers [is] that there have been kids in Darien that have died in very similar circumstances because they drank too much. They were out with friends, and their friends basically dumped them off at their own house. I mean that. [...]

But in all the instances that I can think this just kind of played out where kids were literally panicked. They were also intoxicated, so they weren't making the best decisions, and they literally dumped their friend off — whether it's at the house, kids have been dumped off at Post 53 because people don't want to get in trouble, and in some cases, one of which I was directly involved with, the kid ended up dying purely because he drank too much, and his friends didn't want to deal with him.

One of them was thrown in an Uber and sent home, and you know, circumstances unfolded, and he ended up dying. It's not — this isn't something that happens [only] in other places.

[...]

It's not something you're going to read about because when an accident happens, barring any really extenuating circumstances, you're not going to read about it in the paper. It's not our job to report to the media when somebody passes away every time.

We deal with crimes and things of that nature, so you're not going to read about it when a 24-year-old dies of an overdose. You might hear about it, but you're not going to read about it . So I think a lot of times parents tend to move with their kid's-age social circles, so if that kid was 25 and your child is 15 and you're not

running in the same circles, you might not hear about it.

You just think about it — you're [as the parent of a child who died] going to tell anybody?

So just understand that this happens. I've been there. I've seen it. It's not something that's not happening here. I mean, you can talk about what the reasons for that are, but that's sort of my take on that.

Question: *What [did] you observe about Darien drinking patterns as you [were] the school resource officer at Darien High School?*

Answer:

I thought it was kind of funny. I was the SRO for the past 4 1/2 years and now obviously I'm on the other side of the fence with things.

It's been three weeks, and I've had cases on my desk every Monday of some sort of [teenage drinking]. [...] I'll come in on Monday morning and by the trash barrels [at Police Department Headquarters] there's like five 30-packs of Busch Light, which obviously no adult would ever go near [Laughter from the audience]. So, I kind of get an indication of what I'm going to be walking into.

You know, I wasn't in today because I was at a training, so I was in for the first time [much later in the day] and there they are, the five or six 30-packs of Busch Light. [...]

I'll never forget my first open house in Darien, and the big joke with the teachers is that you could become intoxicated just talking with half the parents. So I get a kick out of that.

See also:

- [Teen Drinking & Binge Drinking: Dr. Frank Bartolomeo's Perspective](#) (March 9)
- [Binge Drinking Hits Close to Home: Some Things Darien Parents and Teens Should Know](#) (March 6)
- [Teens Have Died from Binge Drinking in Darien: Police Officer at Panel Discussion](#) (March 9)
- [What Happens When Darien Police Visit an Under-Age Party with Alcohol](#) (Feb. 21)
- [DHS Principal Ellen Dunn on Drugs, Drinking, Disciplining Students and What Parents Can Do](#) (Feb. 12)
- [Panelists: High Rate of Teen Drinking in Darien Comes with High Stress, Lax Attitudes](#) (Feb. 8)
- [Experts Offer Parents Tips on Building Resiliency, Respecting Kids While Holding Them to Standards](#) (Feb. 19)

- [Darien Health Dept: How Many of These Risks from Under-Age Drinking Do You Know?](#) (Feb. 19)
- [Commentary: Parents Need to Make Clear to Teens That Drinking Is Unacceptable](#) (Feb. 7)
- [‘Truth & Consequences’ Panel Discussion on Teen Drinking at DHS Auditorium](#) (Feb. 7)
- [Group Launches Campaign to Counter Darien’s ‘Troubling Rate of Teenage Binge Drinking’](#) (Feb. 2)
- [DRINKING IN DARIEN: Worse than Elsewhere for Both Teens and Adults — and the Problem is Growing](#) (Jan. 30)

But I'll never forget standing there talking with a parent, and she was hell-bent on convincing me the kids should be taught how to drink, that they should drink "under my care" or that this was somehow beneficial. It was just the first of hundreds of conversations that I would have [...] I don't live in Darien, yet I'm immersed in the culture, obviously, daily, and the amount of adults that are under this spell that this is a good thing to let kids drink — I mean, some of the people that I've heard say it — I shake my head and I wonder if I'm in the Twilight Zone, and it gets to the point where you start to almost think that you are in the Twilight Zone. [...]

I'm glad that they're doing this "06820" thing [the Thriving Youth Initiative and the OurDarien.org website] and that little postcard they handed out to everybody [...] I chuckled when I picked up that postcard because it's literally the same as the picture that I just saw [when looking at a case file involving the 30-packs of Busch Light]. [...]

We can't be at each house to say, "You know, that's not good for your kids," or "That's not good for your friends' kids," so I need to personally feel sometimes that I'm literally at the edge of my professional abilities as far as what am I supposed to say. I don't know how to change parents minds.

So I'm glad this whole "06820" thing is happening because it's literally like a glimpse into what I see coming across my desk now pretty regularly.

***Question:** How do you best prepare your children for the freedom that comes with college, so they're empowered and ready to make good decisions?*

Answer:

Letting them drink in your basement is definitely what you should do. [Laughter from the audience.] That was sarcasm.

Question: *What is the penalty or is there a penalty for someone who calls for help for their friend [who's been drinking and seems to be in trouble]?*

Answer:

There's instances I can point to where the people who called did not get in trouble. [And at some colleges and elsewhere, there's immunity for people who call to get first responders to their friends who are in trouble from drinking or drugs.]

I can point to specific instances where kids in this town have had a friend who drank too much and got sick call 911 and police and an ambulance came. Not only did they not get in trouble with police, but people sort of went to bat for them at the school with the whole "commitment" thing [school disciplinary measures taken when students have been found to have been drinking or in the presence of others who were drinking] to make sure there were no consequences for them at school, either.

See also:

- OurDarien.com — micro-website from the Thriving Youth Initiative of the Community Fund of Darien (also on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#))

So you've got to understand that there are people who are willing to recognize that you're doing the right thing. I mean, the alternative is this [Palmieri indicated the movie screen where "Haze" had just been shown, about a teenager who died after binge drinking too much and not getting help]. And I can tell you, like I said, it's happened in Darien.

So that's why I sort of said at the beginning, it's easy for me to sit up here and say, well, you know, you should face the consequences of your decisions, but I really think that there's so many people trying to get you to do the right thing that it's really not that tough a decision any more.

We know what's going on; we know what could happen; we don't want it to happen.

Question: *Why do you think Darien specifically is so partial to this behavior [teenage drinking]?*

Answer:

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In my honest opinion, it's just the culture of the town, and I'm not sure — fixing that is a bigger answer than I have. I mean, kids — they're not going to do any different if they don't know any different. [...]

When I come here, it's like, this place where it's different and all the kind of norms I remember from when I was a kid are twisted. I never, in a million years, would have thought of any of my friends' parents saying that it was OK for us to drink. That's just my personal experience, so I don't know how it changed [to] that.

I'm hoping — you know, all you can really do is raise awareness. I mean, we're certainly not going to arrest our way out of it. I mean, it's a felony to throw a party, and that doesn't seem to deter anybody.

I mean, you get thrown off your sports team — that seems to be worse to some people. So what else do you do? I don't know, and I'm not sitting up here thinking someday Darien's going to be, you know, a dry town. Probably not. But there's got to be something that can be done with the culture.

You know, I sat with people the other day at a different meeting, and adults admitted that, "Yeah, we drank a lot, too, so we go out, you know, I'm on the bar car every night on the way home." This is a guy talking about himself. "You know my kid's lacrosse meeting was at Jimmy's Southside."

I mean, it's just this thing — it's like you can't leave your house without it. You can't go to your kid's open house at Darien High School without being half in the bag. So until that changes, I don't know, I don't know. I certainly don't know the answer.

I feel like there is hope. One thing I always sort of brag about about this town is the drunk driving thing. I mean, I've been here for eight years [and] I can't think of the last kid we've arrested for DWI [driving while intoxicated] because the town got together and decided, "You know what — we're going to do the Safe Rides thing." [[Safe Rides](#) is a program that allows under-age drinkers to call for a ride to get dropped off at their home with no questions asked.] And I think it was one of the better decisions they ever made.

There are towns that refused to do it because they feel like it's condoning drinking, like New Canaan. I can't tell you how many times guys have called me to ask me about it, but they just won't let them get it off the ground [in that town]. [...]

[T]he kids in this town are really good kids, and I always tell the people that. They really are. I just think that sometimes they're just put in a bad situation, or they're shown bad things, but here the town has decided, "Know what? We're going to sort of hedge our bets a little bit and admit that yes, drinking does happen. We're not condoning it, but it does happen, so we want to make sure you're safe. We want to make sure you make a good decision [about drinking and driving]," because at the end of the whole thing, that's all we're really talking about here — good decisions.

So I feel that was real successful for this town. We don't get drunk driving with kids. It's all adults.

There's just a lot of kids who don't do this stuff [drinking]. [...]

There are kids in this audience that are perfectly happy and have fun and don't do this stuff. We don't tend to sit in groups like this and talk about them because they're doing very well, but there are a lot of kids.

Whenever I talk with younger kids who are coming to the high school, I always try to make a point of saying [that] I think back to my own experience going to D.A.R.E [Drug Abuse Resistance Education — a decades-old anti-drug program for students] and, like, this cop comes in and scares [...] you, and you think that there's going to be drug pushers hiding in the bathrooms.

I want them to know that when they come here [to Darien High School] nobody — like, really, I can't find a different way to put it but — nobody really cares what you do. You can have your friends and your friends are going to kind of make a decision, but if you come to Darien High School and you don't go to a party, you're not that cool, nobody's going to be begging you to come. I mean, if you want to do that — and I think there's going to be a certain pressure for you to do that, and it's all self-inflicted, because you think everyone's doing it, then you're probably going to do it.

But there's a large amount of kids in this town this doesn't apply to. [...] We tend to focus on just these kids [with behavior problems].

Question: *If your friend is drinking too much, what should you, as a kid, do?*

Answer:

So, I have a sort of two-pronged answer. Of course, my official answer is, you should call 911 and get assistance. But something that's interesting, and probably should be factored in here — something that we learned is that when somebody stops drinking, it's not like, you know, [...] you drink and have five beers, eight beers, 10 beers — it's not like at your 10th beer, when you finish it, you just stop and don't get any more drunk. Because your body takes a while to process booze. You continue to get more drunk after that last drink, depending on how much you drank.

So the second part of my answer is, don't leave people, because you [...] may drop them off at home, and you think they're pretty banged up and they're just going to sleep it off — but they're going to continue to get drunk. You don't know what's going to happen after you leave, so don't leave people.

And it happens in this town, whenever there's a party and everybody runs, we always find that one kid in the

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basement who can't even stand up. And I say that, not jokingly: Don't leave people.