

## In fight against student drinking, colleges say there's progress but still a long way to go

Written by Rick Ruggles

Alcohol consumption has bedeviled colleges for decades.

Colleges and universities have fought back with training programs, education and enforcement, and many officials say these strategies make a difference. But a wild party on Aug. 23 in a neighborhood near Creighton University shows that college-age drinking remains a serious challenge.

A new Husker football season begins today with Nebraska hosting South Alabama, and it may test the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's and law enforcement's ability to combat the drinking phenomenon. Off-campus drinking is particularly hard to monitor.

And off-campus parties have the potential to get out of hand in part because of the influence of social media.

"All it takes is somebody posting (a party announcement) on Snapchat, Twitter and Instagram," said Susanne Williams, coordinator for alcohol and other drug prevention at UNL. Then people pour in.

Iowa State discontinued its weeklong VEISHEA celebration in 2014 because of inebriation and rioting in and around the university. An Iowa State analysis at the time said social media "contributed to the rapid assembly of crowds" and spread word of parties "within seconds to thousands of people."

A Creighton junior who lives in the Gifford Park house that was at the center of the party admitted this week that the turnout exceeded expectations. She apologized.

Nevertheless, she said, the so-called Denim Party at the start of the Creighton school year has been going on for a while. "It's kind of a tradition," said the young woman, who declined to give her name.

Years of house parties in the Gifford Park neighborhood have turned neighbors sour. "It's kind of like we're trapped in our own neighborhood," said Brittney Rubek, who has an 8-year-old daughter.

Rubek said the neighborhood is gradually being taken over by landlords who pack Creighton students into rental houses.

Creighton spokeswoman Cindy Workman said late this week: "Creighton takes seriously the need to educate students about the importance of making good choices regarding alcohol. Our efforts are aimed at reducing high-risk drinking and encouraging students to abandon binge drinking behaviors."

UNL knows about off-campus parties. The North Bottoms neighborhood, just north of Memorial Stadium, has been a haven for house parties for a long time. A couple of years ago, one or more huge parties attracted considerable law enforcement and neighbor complaints.

Lincoln Police Department spokeswoman Angela Sands said she believes the North Bottoms parties have been suppressed somewhat. Sands attributed part of that to intensive patrolling of the North Bottoms. She also said the Lincoln Police Department uses social media to its advantage by warning potential partyers that the police have their eyes on them.

And the Lincoln police have partnerships, she said, with landlords and homeowners.

The Lincoln Police Department's northwest team, which covers the North Bottoms, focuses heavily on enforcement on football Saturdays. By early October of last year, the northwest police team had given 18 citations, or tickets, for minor in possession, 92 for illegal parking and three for public urination; in addition, 38 vehicles had been towed.

Kearney Police Capt. Mike Young said progress has been made in halting big off-campus parties near the University of Nebraska at Kearney. They haven't all disappeared, he said, but for the most part, the day of 400-person parties and collapsing floors (that happened once) have ceased.

Young spoke vaguely of the effectiveness of a 1992 disorderly house ordinance and working closely with the university.

UNK spokesman Todd Gottula said his college doesn't ignore troublesome situations.

"We're in regular contact with the police department," Gottula said.

UNL's Williams said universities have gained knowledge about what works in curbing heavy alcohol consumption. This has led to creation of programs such as Step-Up. That national student training program promotes bystander intervention, in which a student encourages a drunken classmate to get food and water, and calls 911 if necessary.

"The program works," Williams said.

"I think there's still the perception that it's a rite of passage," she said of college drinking. Williams and others said many students think that just about one drinks heavily at college. That's a misconception that alcohol awareness programs try to correct.

Many universities across the country, including Creighton and Iowa State, use an online program for students called AlcoholEdu. The prevention program, in use at more than 400 colleges, uses various methods to teach students about the harm of drinking, such as showing the impact of alcohol on the brain.

"It's not like this is the one thing" that works, said Brian Vanderheyden, assistant director of student wellness at Iowa State. He said it takes a combination of strategies.

Lindsey Hanlon, prevention manager at the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, said declines in drinking have been gradual.

A survey of Nebraskans 19 to 25 years old indicated 65% binge drank in 2010. That had dropped to 52% by last year, Hanlon said. Binge drinking involves consuming four or five drinks in a couple of hours.

Peyton Walker, a UNL junior who hopes to go to law school, said drinking “surrounds us at a very young age.” That includes booze in movies, on TV and in songs.

“That’s what you expect when you come to college,” said Walker, of Fort Collins, Colorado. She said it’s been easier than she expected to find communities at UNL that have nothing to do with drinking, such as the honors program and church.

College students, she said, want to fit in and don’t want to miss out. “They want to seem cool,” she said.

Chris Wagner of Project Extra Mile in Omaha said his organization receives grants from a government behavioral health agency. He would like to direct some of that money to the Omaha Police Department, Wagner said, to increase staffing for Gifford Park party enforcement.

Among the problems associated with these types of parties, Wagner said, are underage drinking and the risk of teen pregnancy, drunken driving, violence and sexual assault.

Omaha City Councilman Chris Jerram, who represents Gifford Park, noted that the police said they didn’t ticket any of the partyers on Aug. 23. Apparently, only two officers responded at the scene.

Given the longtime party problems in that neighborhood, Jerram said, the time for gentle reminders has passed. Nothing compels a person to be a good citizen quite like a trip before a judge at 9 a.m. on a Monday, Jerram said.

Chris Foster of the Gifford Park Neighborhood Association board said he thinks zoning enforcement, police presence and other factors can help. “I think the strategy is multi-threaded, and it’s got to be a team effort,” Foster said.

Omaha Police Capt. Mark Matuza told Jerram and Foster by email late this week that his northeast precinct was on other calls, so the southeast precinct responded to the Gifford Park calls.

“My lieutenants are aware that zero tolerance will be the mindset going forward from here,” Matuza said.

Foster said he drove slowly through a slew of partyers near 34th and Davenport Streets that Friday evening. “Just bad things can happen, and in a hurry, and then you put a lot of people at risk.”

He said he considered taking video of the scene. But sitting in his car surrounded by chaos, he said, he didn’t feel safe pointing a camera at the revelers.