

Binge there, done that

By Kaitlin Melanson/kmelanso@cnc.com

GateHouse Media

Wed Apr 25, 2007, 02:18 PM EDT

If you think your straight-A student couldn't possibly become addicted to alcohol, Chris and Toren Volkmann urge you to think again. On Tuesday, May 1, local non-profit organization TeamUp will cap off its three-part series on substance abuse with a presentation by the mother-and son pair who will share their personal experiences with the effects of underage drinking.

Beginning at 7 p.m. at the Veterans Middle School Performing Arts Center, the Volkmanns will discuss their book, "From Binge to Blackout," which chronicles Toren's struggle with drinking. Toren began drinking at the age of 14. By 24, he was in rehab.

The Volkmanns' talk is being presented courtesy of a grant from the North Shore Medical Center's Community Health Improvement Fund and is open to families throughout the North Shore.

How does Toren explain his entry into the world of alcohol? "Flirting with curiosity," he said. He added, "Though I began at 14, it didn't really become a big issue until my freshman year in high school. By then I was drinking heavily, and by that I mean I was getting drunk one or two nights every weekend. It became part of my life."

Within his first year of experimenting regularly with alcohol, Toren said he began to experience some consequences to his actions.

"Six months after I started I was in trouble with the police, I got kicked off the soccer team, and I was in trouble with my parents for coming home extremely intoxicated on a couple of occasions," Toren said. "I then went back and forth between shaping up and falling into old habits."

At this point, Toren and his parents shared one thought: He was doing well in school, so of course the problem could not have been that significant. At college, Toren continued to portray a sense of "normalcy" in the form of good grades, but that normalcy was only skin deep.

"In college, I went underground, and my parents never heard about what was going on," Toren said. "I had decent grades, but I partied heavily, sometimes even dangerously, on the weekends."

Even still, Toren graduated from college and joined the Peace Corps, leading his family to believe that his youthful indiscretions were behind him. Four months into his assignment in Paraguay, that theory might have seemed correct, with Toren realizing he no longer wanted to drink to get drunk, but by that point it was too late.

"I wanted to turn to a normal life, but a dependency had formed, and it didn't matter how much I planned on drinking, I still got drunk," Toren said. "Seven months in, I spoke with a nurse and was sent to rehab in Washington, D.C. where I spent 30 days, followed by six months in a halfway home."

Undergoing evaluations for rehab, Toren then picked up the phone and called his mother.

"I knew he had abused alcohol as a teen and was a heavy drinker in college, but when he called me from rehab, I just about fell on the floor," Chris said.

As she shares in their book, Chris' thoughts may be familiar to many parents whose teens have experimented with alcohol. "It's only alcohol, I reassure myself. Not a really serious drug like crack or heroin or cocaine."

She says now that she thinks very differently. "I know so much more now about brain formation and how it is affected by alcohol, that I don't want to look the other way," she said. "I want to be proactive and help other parents learn how to see the signs earlier."

While in what she called her "mourning period," a time in which she would continually question what she did wrong as a parent, Chris said she went to the library to seek comfort by researching stories of how other families had been affected by underage drinking, but she was unable to find such a book.

"When I read Toren's journal writing when he was in rehab, it was hard to learn of what my son had gone through. I kept thinking that this couldn't be my son," Chris said. "I thought that if this is happening to us, there must be other families out there going through the same thing. So I talked to Toren about the idea of writing a book when he was in rehab, and we started writing when he was in the halfway house."

After completing the original version of the book, then called "Our Drink," the mother-and-son team began traveling cross the country, visiting high schools and colleges to share their story. During that time, the Penguin Group picked up publishing rights to the then-self-published book, allowing the Volkmanns to revise the original, adding more detail about Toren's recovery.

Now having been through all, through still in the final stage of recovery with her son, Chris offers six steps for parents to follow to help keep their children safe.

"Six may seem like a large number, but they are all very basic things you can do," Chris said. "Number one, inform your kids at a young age of the actual physical dangers of alcohol, showing them the amount of damage they can do to their brains. Number two, do some research and be sure to tell your children what you expect of them. Many parents tell their children that they don't want them to do drugs, but specifically say, 'Don't use alcohol.' Number three, have a constant conversation going about how alcohol is used in and viewed in the greater society. Look at how it is portrayed in our culture through advertising and discuss how it is glamorized. Number four, keep your kids in activities, no matter what they may be, and always attend their events and show your support. Number five, limit access to alcohol in your own home. Believe it or not, most kids are getting alcohol from their parents' liquor cabinets. And number six, intervene as soon as you think there may be a problem. Studies show that parents wait an average of four years before intervening, and that is just too long to wait."

Chris added, "There is a lot of help out there within your community. Don't think of it as a stigma."

As part of their presentation, the Volkmanns will show PowerPoint slides displaying images of Toren's teen years, and openly discuss their experience.

“This is something that can happen in even the most affluent communities. We see it happen all over,” Toren said. “In my case, I had a dad who was a doctor, a mom who was an educator. I felt entitled to go out and experiment, and I thought I would never have to face any consequences.”

Toren added, “My goal for this book is to reduce the stigma and give families the courage to talk about and confront the issues behind underage drinking.”

Co-founder of TeamUp Susan Hauck says the organization hopes that this presentation will open the door to conversation between parents and their children.

“It is about starting a two-way conversation that never stops,” Hauck said. “Even in fourth grade there are things parents can discuss, with the other side of that being that they need to also listen to what their children are trying to say.”

Hauck continued, “I am saddened to see the pressures that our children have to go through today. We need to continue talking about it from different angles, and let our kids know that we don’t expect them to be perfect. Families need to be constantly talking and keeping the lines of communication open.”

Along with their partnership with the North Shore Medical Center, TeamUp has also partnered with Comcast on this project, airing a short public-service announcement featuring students from Marblehead. Resident Steve Webster, a freelance creative director, produced the PSA.

To register for the presentation, visit www.TeamUpMarblehead.org. For more information on underage drinking, visit the Volkmanns’ Web site at www.bingetoblackout.com.