

About Health TV with Jeanne Blake
Underage Drinking
www.abouthhealth.com

JEANNE BLAKE: Welcome to *About Health TV*. I'm Jeanne Blake. Many young people and adults consider underage drinking to be a harmless rite of passage rather than a potentially deadly choice. Many parents feel powerless to stop their kids from drinking. They look back on their teen years and say they drank without consequence, so they think their children can drink safely too. But young people who drink before age 15, rather than wait till 21, are four times more likely to develop a problem with alcohol later in life. This is another proven fact: When young people and parents talk about underage drinking, the benefits of waiting until you're 21, and the potential consequences of alcohol abuse, these young people are more likely to wait until their 21 to drink. In Boston, Mayor Thomas Menino recently launched an underage drinking awareness program co-sponsored by Partners Health Care and Harvard Pilgrim Health Care. It includes the training of teachers and other school personnel, grades five through eight, and neighborhood representatives in the use of the DVD *Alcohol: True Stories, Hosted by Matt Damon*, and the booklet *Words Can Work: When Talking About Alcohol*. The campaign makes available these materials to the Boston public schools and to neighborhood coalitions.

[VIDEO CLIP]

MAYOR MENINO: Youths who drink are at risk of alcohol poisoning, addiction, violence, sexual assaults, traffic accidents, other accidents like drowning. All could happen if they're out there drinking. As we all know, alcohol is a gateway drug which can lead to the use of other drugs like marijuana and OxyContin.

SPEAKER 1: I stripped myself of making positive decisions for the future, and it was because I drank under age. There was a lot of things that I wanted to do with my life, and I stripped all of that. I stripped myself of all that because I thought it would be a little bit cool to hang out and drink and do all the things that I wasn't supposed to do under age. It escalated, things got worse. The mayor also spoke about how alcohol and violence go together. A quick story. I was drinking one night, drunk, got into a fight that had nothing to do with me, had my face slashed open, had 50 stitches – all a direct result of alcohol. Putting myself into situations where my life could have been taken. I don't want to be blamed, you know what I mean? But at that time it's better to be your own person and move on, because your life is going

to be so much easier afterwards. And parents, man, communication, be patient, just sit with them.
Bottom line.

SPEAKER 2: The dangers of alcohol and underage drinking were not discussed in my home. As a product of the '80s I was urged to dare to just say no to drugs and to not drink and drive. When I started drinking at age 13, I wasn't aware that alcohol that was even a drug, and I was still too young to drive. I did not believe that those things applied to me, and no one told me otherwise. As a direct result of my careless behavior while intoxicated, I became a mother and a high-school dropout at age 17. By age 20 I had lost my driver's license, respect of my family and friends, I was without my little girl, and I was homeless. By that point in my life, I had lost the power of choice. Any child who has not picked up a drink still has that power of choice. I went into detox at age 22, and because I've stayed sober since I've been blessed with my family, home, daughter, and got my driver's license back. With a lot of help, I have regained the power to make choices today. The choices I make as a parent are the toughest. One of the most important choices that I have made is to give my 9-year-old daughter the education that I did not receive as a child about underage drinking, the dangers of alcohol. It is my hope that she will never go through what I have experienced and the pain that I have gone through myself, and the pain that I've also watched others go through. I pray that she will not have to bury the memory of friends in a lifetime that I have had to in the past five years. ... I urge parents to please speak with your children about the dangers of drugs, including alcohol. Do not assume that if they do not ask you they will not get false information from someone else.

[END CLIP]

JEANNE BLAKE: And now Julie Taylor joins us in the studio to talk with us some more about her early use of alcohol and her recovery and her efforts to reach young people and parents with life-saving messages. Julie, thanks so much for coming in to talk with us.

JULIE: Thank you for having me.

JEANNE BLAKE: You started drinking very early, at the age of 13. That is actually, according to national statistics, the average age of young people's first drink, and that surprises a lot of people. That doesn't surprise you, does it?

JULIE: No, it doesn't, not at all. I actually remember feeling really grown up the first time I drank. I that was because I was watching older people interact with others, and I wanted to be able to do that.

I wanted to be able to interact with other people without that fear that I had, and once I started to drink I was able to do that, interact with other people and to feel a part of. Unfortunately, it did take its toll.

JEANNE BLAKE: Were your peers drinking as well, or were you drinking with older kids?

JULIE: I was drinking with older children. Not a lot of children my age were drinking the way that I was drinking, because of the addictive part. I did find older children in my high school that were.

JEANNE BLAKE: You progressed to alcoholism, which we'll talk about in a minute, but how quickly did you progress in your drinking?

JULIE: It started on the weekends, that kind of binge drinking, drinking with other kids – I can't even say children – at parties and in the middle of the woods, in places called the Ditch ... But after school, a lot of times at home by myself.

JEANNE BLAKE: Did your parents discuss that you were drinking? Did they know?

JULIE: Not at all. I did a really good job of covering that up, and when I came into recovery, my family was pretty shocked.

JEANNE BLAKE: Was it so much that you were covering up well, or were your parents, like a lot of parents, not wanting to see that you were drinking?

JULIE: It wasn't really discussed in my home, like I said ... as a product of the '80s I was urged to dare – DARE – to stay off drugs. I wasn't considering alcohol a drug at all, by any means. When I heard the word "drugs" I didn't think of alcohol.

JEANNE BLAKE: I think that's very true with a lot of people, that many consider it a harmless rite of passage, and yet alcohol is the leading drug of choice, and it leads to all kinds of negative consequences – those you can see, that are visible, like car crashes, lost opportunities, which I mentioned, which I'd like you to discuss in a minute, and to addiction. When did you realize you were addicted to alcohol?

JULIE: I realized it when I started losing things, and I wasn't – I drank because I was losing things and I was losing things because I drank.

JEANNE BLAKE: But you don't mean like losing your wallet.

JULIE: I don't mean losing my wallet. I was missing out on – I was losing jobs, I was losing friends, I was losing respect of my family. I was not showing up for family events such as Thanksgiving and Christmas. I was drinking on a daily basis – or a nightly basis.

JEANNE BLAKE: How old were you at this time? Give us some context.

JULIE: I was about 20. I had lost my license –

JEANNE BLAKE: Because you were drinking and driving. I wasn't drinking and driving, it was the morning after a night of drinking, and I woke up late and was late for work, and I was arrested – not arrested, I'm sorry, pulled over and charged with driving to endanger, because I was going so fast to get to work. But it was a direct result of the night before. I was sleeping, as I did many, many mornings. So I lost my license, and then lost my job because I could not drive to work, and I lost physical custody of my little girl as a result of my wanting to drink when I wanted to drink, making decisions based on wanting to drink.

JEANNE BLAKE: You have a beautiful little girl, Corinne, and you have a wonderful relationship with her now. But tell us a little bit about how Corinne came to be and the problems that surrounded that when you lost custody of her.

JULIE: Corinne came to be when I – I became pregnant with her, I was 16, I was at a party, drinking very heavily. I don't really even remember the conception all that clearly. Definitely wasn't with someone that I loved and wanted to spend eternity with, and once again made decisions based on being intoxicated, and that affected the rest of my life. I had her a month before my 18th birthday, and I struggled with the responsibilities of being a mother, because I was just a child myself. I would give Corinne to whoever would take her, so that I could go out and drink the way that I wanted to drink, not because I'm a horrible person or a horrible mother, but because I was sick with the addiction.

JEANNE BLAKE: So you hit bottom, as they say in addiction, when you were how old, Julie?

JULIE: I came into recovery when I was 22.

JEANNE BLAKE: How did that come about?

JULIE: I had actually attempted suicide. I'd realized that my life had become pretty depressing. I was waking up and drinking and drinking myself into a stupor and crying myself back to sleep, and that was basically my existence. I would walk around telling people that I was a waste of human flesh and oxygen, and I'm just praying to die. Towards the end I got really tired of praying and not getting what I wanted, and thought I'd take it into my own hands. After a night of drinking and feeling sorry for myself and crying, I was dropped off at my house and took a bottle of pills and tried to kill myself.

JEANNE BLAKE: And who found you?

JULIE: No one found me, actually. I don't know what happened. I should have died that night. I did wake up the next morning very, very ill, and actually I called my pediatrician – who I hadn't spoken to in a very long time, at age 22 – and I told him how sick I was, and he told me to get to the emergency room right away, and that's when my journey of recovery took off.

JEANNE BLAKE: So you went into treatment for how long?

JULIE: When I went into treatment, it was a 30-day treatment. Now people are lucky if they get five to seven days. It was 30 days –

JEANNE BLAKE: And you mean by that, that because of the way treatment is difficult to get into, there are waiting lists, and young people and adults aren't kept as long as they need it, is that what you're saying?

JULIE: Yes. With insurance today and managed care, it's really hard to get that time needed to stay sober and learn the skills in order to do so outside of treatment.

JEANNE BLAKE: What kind of conversations have you had with your parents? I know you're close with your parents again. I know, from talking with you, that you're not the kind of person who blames others for where you are in your life, that this is about the choices you made. I know that you encourage other parents to talk with their children about alcohol and other drugs. What kind of conversations have you had with your parents about this?

JULIE: I think it's pretty difficult for parents to find themselves, when their children have problems of any kind, especially with addiction. Why didn't I see it? Why could I have done differently? And basically, what I can say is just to listen. Children want to be heard, children want to be hope and

want to be honest with people, but I think there's a lot of fear wrapped around that, doing something that I'm not supposed to be doing and how are they going to react to that? Am I going to get grounded? What's going to happen. I found that the consequences to my drinking were a little more than being grounded, so I didn't feel comfortable talking to my family. I did feel comfortable talking with people who gave me false information, however.

JEANNE BLAKE: So in other words, if your parents knew that you were drinking, what would have happened?

JULIE: I don't know. I imagine that they would have done everything that they could to help me.

JEANNE BLAKE: But in other words, in your mind, you felt that it wasn't a safe place to take that information. So what do you hope parents would do differently, parents who want to do the right thing for their children, who want to be available, who want to help their children put off drinking as long as they can ... What do you hope parents will do?

JULIE: I hope that parents will arm themselves with the facts about underage drinking and drinking, period. And also their children, and discuss this openly with their children, and let them know that it is a choice and they won't be condemned if they come with a question, that they are willing to sit with them and take the time. It's so hard these days with working families and single mothers to take the time to sit with your child and discuss the truth, and be open to hear the truth from your children, because times have changed ... and they may be able to teach the parents something as well about what's going on in the world, and peer pressure, and what's really out there and how hard it is. To be able to sit and listen and openly ...

JEANNE BLAKE: Be an advocate, and give young people a safe place to turn. I think there is a perception among young people, too, that everybody else is drinking. You work with young people who are in active addiction and are seeking recovery. What are you seeing as some of the pressures and the reasons that young people are using drugs, including alcohol, increasingly at a younger age?

JULIE: Like I said in the beginning, the girl who was talking about impressing the 20-year-old boy – I can identify with that. It's you're trying to be cool, trying to fit in, everybody else is doing it sort of thing. Just a lot of people I've talked to have had some tragedies in life and have drunk to cover up those feelings and to not feel them.

JEANNE BLAKE: To medicate their emotions.

JULIE: Exactly. And not having a healthy outlet for all of that can cause a need to medicate those feelings, and that's basically what I hear.

JEANNE BLAKE: In a way, that goes back to what you were saying about parents being available to listen to their children, because these are very challenging times ... I think parents that I've talked to also are a bit oblivious, in some cases, to the turmoil their children are living with, in just the world as it is today, the stresses they feel, and they need that outlet, rather to – as you say – just scoff at them.

JULIE: A lot of turmoil that children go through may seem pretty minimal to adults, because they can't remember what it was like when the boy at school didn't like them or the kids at school teased them. They are important to those children, and they need to be comforted in any way possible, instead of "Oh, don't worry about, by the time you're my age you won't remember that." They're there right now. With Corinne I try, because she does have problems at school – the boys, oh god, boys. Nine years old. I just try to put myself where she's at, and I try to remember what it was like to be 9 years old, although it was a while ago, and to know how personal my feelings are and how accepted I would like to feel when I go to somebody with those feelings, and try to just be with her and let her know it's OK to feel sad and it's OK to feel empty and alone, but being alone is a choice. As soon as she can invite somebody else, hopefully me, into a conversation about how she's feeling, she's no longer alone.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's right. I remember, I think I was in my 30s before I realized that everybody, that most people think adolescence is a difficult time. Why didn't somebody tell me that? It was so liberating. Julie, you've worked so hard in your recovery, and to stay sober and to be a good mom, which you are, I'm wondering what your message is for young people who think they can drink without consequence.

JULIE: Well, the age for drinking is 21 for a reason. I got sober when I was 22, and I had started drinking by 13. I just wasn't ready. I guess the message would be to talk to somebody, anybody.

JEANNE BLAKE: When you say you weren't ready, what does that mean? Not ready to drink.

JULIE: I wasn't emotionally available, really. I wasn't emotionally ready to – I don't even know what grade I was in, but I was having trouble with just doing my homework, never mind drinking and going to parties and being crazy. I was not emotionally mature enough to be able to handle the

responsibility that comes along with drinking, and I didn't realize that there would be so much responsibility involved. To talk to somebody they trust, some adult who has the knowledge and is willing to stick with them and share that, because if they don't – and for parents, also, to take that time, because your children will find somebody who will listen, and they may not be as informed as they are. That was my experience. I went to somebody – I had a 22-year-old friend when I was 15, someone who would show me the ropes as far as she was concerned, and nothing good came out of that.

JEANNE BLAKE: Some young people might listen to what you have to say and say, Well, you drank, and yeah, you went through a bad time, but look, you've got it all together again, you're a good mom, you've got a job that you like – but I think young people tend to gloss over, there's a tendency to do that. You went through some very hard times, and as you've said, you lost things that you can't ever regain. I think young people need to understand that when they take the risk of drinking at an early age, they really do risk giving up a part of their life.

JULIE: I was very lucky. I'm definitely not in the majority. Most people who went through what I went through, most alcoholics, die drunk, and they don't ever get to experience what it's like to be sober. It's a lot of work to stay – and it took a lot of help. I've not done any of this on my own, but I'm very lucky and I could have died. I should have died. I'd driven intoxicated with no license and no brake in my car in order to get to the bar. I've done all sorts of things to put myself in situations where I shouldn't have made it through.

JEANNE BLAKE: But also, you did lose years and experiences that you can't get back.

JULIE: Right.

JEANNE BLAKE: As fortunate as you were to survive all of that, there are years and experiences as a teenager you can't recapture. I hear that from a lot of young people who become addicted as teens, and then clean and sober when they're in their 20s, and it's like those years are just gone.

JULIE: And the emotional growth, too. Like I robbed myself of emotional growth. From the age of 13 and 22, I did not grow emotionally at all whatsoever. So when I got sober at 22, I was 13, and looking at a 22-year-old woman. I had a lot of making up to do, which I can't – some of those years are just gone. Gone, gone, gone. And missed out also on my daughter, on her early years of going to the park and all sorts of things that I didn't get to share with her.

JEANNE BLAKE: You've got so much – you share your experience so well, that I hope other young people will be able to hear what you have to say and learn from it. So often, don't you agree that for many parents it's just the "don't drink and drive" message, and they seem to think that's all there is, and really there's so much more that can happen. As I said earlier, there are visible and not-so-visible consequences of drinking and using other drugs at an early age. As you said, it's age 21 for a reason, your brain is still developing and we can't develop emotionally or physically when we're bombarding our brain with chemicals.

JULIE: I have friends who have actually given up their license in order to drink the way that they want to drink, and it's not about drinking and driving, it's about not drinking to live, but so that you can have that experience, the emotional growth, four years of high school that you can remember. I don't have that, and I can never go back to then and get that back.

JEANNE BLAKE: Julie, you're doing a great job, and I know that you're reaching out to a lot of other young people, and I know that you're making a difference. Thank you for coming on today.

JULIE: Thank you for having me.

JEANNE BLAKE: Continued good luck in your recovery, and give that little girl a big squeeze for me. You can learn more about the *Words Can Work* campaign in Boston at wordscanwork.com. We'd like to hear from you about what your neighborhood or your community is doing to help reduce underage drinking. You can reach us at info@aboutthehealth.com. I'd like to thank you for joining us on this edition of *About Health TV*. I'm Jeanne Blake, and I'll see you next time.

About Health TV is sponsored in part by
Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation.
Improving health through medical education,
clinical research and community service.