

Drug use – students learn consequences of their choices

By Kathryn Reed

Ten middle school students died at Lake Tahoe Community College on Tuesday as their classmates watched. Then they went to the funeral and staring back them in the coffin was a reflection of themselves.

Gritty. Gripping. Impactful.

That's what the Drug Store Project is all about. Now in its ninth year, the program is designed to teach sixth-graders about the consequences of doing drugs. One of them being death.



It's not real here -- but the consequences of drug use and abuse could result in death.
Photos/Kathryn Reed

While no one actually died March 27, the 10 groups do go through a series of vignettes that show what can happen if

they become involved with drugs. Death is one of those consequences.

Lisa Huard, who was the safe schools coordinator for Lake Tahoe Unified School District when she began the program, started with seventh-graders. A few years ago it was switched to sixth-graders. With how young children are exposed to drugs, she envisions fifth-graders being part of Drug Store Project.

(Now Tahoe Youth & Family Services is the lead agency, with Huard still at the helm.)

Students in Douglas and Alpine counties also participate in the nearly all-day event.

The premise is a student, who is handpicked to do so, swipes a baggie of drugs from a table where narcotics officers are giving a lesson.

In one group it was Harmony, a sixth-grader at South Tahoe Middle School, who was cuffed and hauled off to juvi hall.

While “the hall” is clearly not the real deal, the probation officers working it are. They talk about the used underwear kids must put on. They’ve been washed. But they sure aren’t white anymore.

That isn’t just some woman in a black robe at the front of the room or some other woman acting like an attorney. That’s El Dorado County Superior Court Judge Suzanne Kingsbury and El Dorado County Assistant District Attorney Lisa Serafini.

That’s one of the powerful things about Drug Store Project – adults are doing their job, even if it’s in scripted form. Those are real handcuffs, real guns, people with real authority to put someone behind bars as well as to counsel them.

Harmony is told to go to counseling at Tahoe Youth & Family

Services.

But then she leaves, goes to a pharm party – where prescription drugs are handed out like candy. She doesn't leave on her own.

Paramedics wheel her out on a gurney. A California Highway Patrol officer arrests the 18-year-old who is hosting this party.

Harmony's group is now assembled in the dark college theater. She comes in on a gurney with an IV in her and breathing apparatus. CPR is not working.

The spotlight is on her.

She dies.

Not a sound comes from her classmates.

She is left there with a white sheet covering her body.

Her classmates leave to attend her funeral.

While a real minister gives the eulogy, when the students go to view Harmony's body what they see instead is themselves. A mirror is there instead of Harmony.

The point: do what Harmony did and they could wind up in a coffin.

True story

While this was make believe, the next venue wasn't.

Molly Cocking is standing behind a table full of medical devices. Those tools helped save her life.

The summer before her sophomore year at South Tahoe High School she drank to the point of having a blood alcohol content of 0.25. In the morning, when she woke up at Barton

Memorial Hospital, her BAC was 0.16 – still twice the legal limit for an adult.

Now age 26 and an emergency room nurse at Carson Tahoe Hospital, Cocking retells her night of horror – at least what she remembers of it. Her parents were told she might not make it through the night.

She credits friends with saving her life – for not letting her sleep it off, for calling for help.

Cocking was told if they had not done that, it's likely she would have died.

She didn't preach about not ingesting drugs or alcohol, but she did encourage them to not do what she did. What Cocking imparted was some of the most practical advice for the day – don't pick up a drink (even it was yours to start with) if there is any chance someone could have slipped something into it, and if you are going to drink or do drugs, be sure it's around people you trust so if something happens, there is someone there to help.

Cocking's story could be a standalone event.

All the pieces

Drug Store Project is a collaborative effort. While Huard is the organizer, more than 150 volunteers help. Harrah's donates about \$8,000 worth of food. Embassy Suites offers a night of lodging to the California National Guard.

The college donates the space.

Agencies donate personnel and equipment – like the Tahoe Douglas bomb squad, Calstar, law enforcement and others.

But the \$13,000 it costs in cash to put the event on seems each year to get more difficult to find. The school district stopped doing the program several years ago. TY&FS relies on a

grant.

And it's not just this one day. TY&FS will be in classrooms Thursday to debrief the kids. This age group needs time to process things like this, thus the reason for waiting a day to go to their schools. About 350 students go through the program each year.

Surveys will be sent to parents. The hope is this triggers conversations in homes.

For more information, go online.

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