

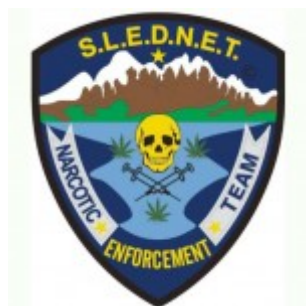
# Narcotics officers do their part to reach kids early

**Publisher's note:** *This is one of a few articles about the Drug Store Project. This marks the 10-year anniversary of the program. This year's event will be April 2 at Lake Tahoe Community College. For more info about volunteering, donating or if you have questions, email Lisa Huard at [lhuard@ymail.com](mailto:lhuard@ymail.com).*

**By Jeff Catchings**

For more than six years I have been involved with South Lake Tahoe's Drug Store Project, a reality based presentation targeting our community's sixth-grade students. The project was originally presented 10 years ago as an awareness campaign targeting our youth and educating them on the debilitating effects drugs have on our society.

This campaign has, over time, become much more than that. By reaching out to an impressionable target group, law enforcement and local educators are bringing the message of "choices" to young students. The choices you make through middle school and high school can shape what you will become as a young adult.



The Drug Store Project is a daylong, simple depiction for the students of "Make bad choices and you or others will have negative consequences." "Good ones will benefit you."

I believe most child advocates agree a sixth-grade child stands on the doorstep of making independent choices on who they will associate with, what type of group they may socialize with and what choices will best suit their

blossoming lifestyles. These students, believe it or not, also stand on the frontline of experimenting with drugs or alcohol. Friends, siblings, social groups and families will weigh heavily on these pending decisions.

The Drug Store Project points the students' attention toward these choices front and center with a reality-based platform depicting the consequences of drug and alcohol abuse.

As the commander of the South Lake El Dorado Narcotic Enforcement Team, I lead a group of law enforcement personnel on the opening presentation for the Drug Store Project. Our presentation deals with recognition of certain drugs, their effects on the body as well as the social consequences of drug use. Every year we see a different group of sixth-grade students who all have the same look on their faces when they walk into our presentation. The look of, "Cool! Were out of class and on a field trip!" In 15 minutes of speaking I change that to "My mouth is shut, my eyes are wide-open and you have my full attention".

It's actually quite easy to do when you experience 24 years of dealing with "not societies finest". The stories that go along with the experience somehow get everyone's attention.

It's this attention that will help the students focus on the remainder of the presentations in the Drug Store Project. My message to the students during our presentation is something they can use as a tool to push back against peer pressure, "That's not me" or "That's not who I am". The words are simple but firm. It's a statement that allows students to remind their friends of who they are, someone who does not use drugs or alcohol.

Helping them understand the effects of drug use and how to respond to someone who encourages it is our cornerstone for the daylong event. The presentation opens the gateway to a realistic encounter for the student and introduces them to the

judicial and familial consequences through role-playing with the presenters. It is accomplished by placing the students in a hands-on environment with first responders, judicial personnel, narcotic agents, educators and the National Guard all of whom carry a message of "Choices – What are yours?"

In addition to the presentations, the California National Guard and first responders present a static display of equipment and are available for one-on-one time with the students. Most students may know some of the Drug Store Project facilitators and ask questions they would not ask in any other forum. Most of the facilitators are members of this community who are not recognized outside of their jobs or vice, versa. Seeing them in uniform always brings a positive feeling to the students who know them.

Numerous students following the presentation have approached me off duty. The comments are always positive and all agree it was "pretty cool." Then I get the "I didn't know you were a cop." Then "That's not me!" The short time spent bonding with these students during this unique day is resounding in a way that's hard to describe.

Hearing "That's not me" shouted across a baseball field on Saturdays and seeing a middle school student giving me the "what's up" nod shows we got in their heads for good.

By no means is the Drug Store Project an end all answer for drug prevention. It is, however, an incredibly successful tool that allows us to convey the message of "choice." Participants in the Drug Store Project receive a message of support from the facilitators and hear firsthand from their own community on the effects of drug and alcohol abuse. Failing to teach the consequences of drug and alcohol abuse rest on the shoulders of those who refuse to advocate against it.

The news of its debilitating effects seems to have grown heavy on those who have heard it for so long. Our society in general

seems to embrace the use of narcotics and alcohol as a recreational vice now more than ever. It is the impression of which we as parents will and rightfully should teach against for children who are standing at the gateway of its use.

As a resident of South Lake Tahoe and one who is involved in youth sports programs, it is the community aspect that I most admire about the Drug Store Project. How people will convene to present a voice against a debilitating vice targeted at our youth. Others admire it as well. So much so that other communities in Placer County have adapted or are starting their own community based model.

Awareness is a powerful tool when targeted at the impressionable. It is something that we should include in the curriculum of growth and knowledge.

I will always be an advocate for this program and would encourage or even challenge others in our own community to take one step further. We should never fail at something so simple to teach.

*Jeff Catchings is the task force commander for South Lake El Dorado Narcotics Enforcement Team.*