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Trust Me: One Perspective on the 21 Law (Cont.)

"Trust me, Dad, I know better." Those were the last words Jeff Levy remembers his 20-year-old son, Jonathan, saying to him two days before a night of partying with college friends on Halloween night in 1997. Jeff did trust Jon. After all, Jon had, just a couple of months earlier, proven he could "clean up his act" after two alcohol-related incidents during his college freshman year, culminating in his crashing a friend's car and receiving a DUI. Jeff decided after that to pull Jon out of school until his son understood responsibility and consequences, and to ensure he was safe. He quickly started to understand that once you pack a son or daughter off to college, they are not under a watchful eye on campus. They are not always safe.

After the incidents his freshman year, Jeff was not only alarmed about Jon's well-being, but Jeff's auto insurance rates went through the roof. Jon came home and worked full time at two jobs to pay off the bills related to the DUI and damage caused to his friend's car. He renounced his own driving privileges until after he would graduate from college. He tested free from drugs and alcohol for a sustained period. Jon was coming around. Jeff decided Jon had proven himself and could return to college to complete his degree. Two and a half months later, Jon's grades were significantly better, he was working out at the gym daily, he was calling home and all seemed fine. Just before Halloween, when Jon spoke to his father by phone about how well he was doing in school, Jeff reminded him of all they'd been through and of his concern for Jon's safety. Finally, Jeff said "Jon, you know you are still underage and cannot drink." Jon's response - "Trust me Dad, I know better."

Three days later Jeff and his family were notified that Jonathan had been killed in an

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alcohol-related car crash, along with an 18-year-old student from a nearby school who was incredibly drunk and driving the car, and a young college professor from Jon's school. the mother of five, who was innocently driving another car, One of Jon's friends survived the crash, but to this day has extensive injuries including serious brain damage.

Jeff and his family were forever changed by the senseless, violent tragedy. The ripple effects on Jon's family and several of his friends have been devastating. Jonathan had been drinking and his judgment was impaired he had accepted a ride from someone who was extremely intoxicated. Certainly, there was peer pressure. Surely, there was a need to feel like a man and be part of the fun that night. While Jeff understands all of these things, what he doesn't understand is how our society has come to accept that binge and underage drinking and drunk driving are considered acceptable behaviors and an inherent part of campus culture in this country.

Drinking under 21 is illegal in all 50 states. Jeff says he is not a volunteer for MADD; he was recruited by circumstances. His story compelled him to take action, traveling to universities and colleges nationwide to observe the drinking culture, talk to college administrators and share his son's story. He concludes there is a lot of work to do in changing the alcohol-intense culture that exists on some campuses, in educating students, parents and college administrators to the dangers of underage and binge drinking and in establishing meaningful consequences to deter these unacceptable behaviors. He believes that parents of underage students should generally be notified of incidents involving alcohol and drugs. "Parents not only have a right to know when their sons and daughters are involved in these dangerous behaviors, but have a principal responsibility to intervene so as to protect not only their own kids but others as well" says Levy. "This is not about kids just having a beer with their pizza it is about illegal, abusive, dangerous and unacceptable drinking behaviors."

Jeff is now a member of the MADD National Board and has been conducting media interviews around the country about his support for the 21 drinking age, which is under attack by some. They falsely conclude that it is the law itself creating excessive drinking on campus. The multitude of scientific literature says to the contrary. The 21 minimum drinking age saves 900 lives a year on the roadways. Each year, 1,700 college students die in alcohol-related incidents. Over a half million college students are injured in alcohol-related incidents. Close to three quarters of a million college students are assaulted by another student who has been drinking, including 100,000 female college students who are involved in alcohol-related sexual assaults. "21 helps stop these deaths, injuries and incidents, and while it doesn't work perfectly, I surely wouldn't trade in the 900 lives a year we are saving. Life is precious, especially that of your own child, and no parent should have to experience what I have," says Levy.

Science shows us that the brain is not fully developed until after age 21 and that among the last areas of the brain to mature are those that affect judgment, impulse control and inhibitions. Teens and alcohol are a deadly combination. They do not mix.

Solutions to the college binge drinking problem start with parents talking with their student sons and daughters about the dangers to their health and safety if they drink before 21, and clearly establishing consequences in the event they choose to drink. This conversation should start around 4th grade. With continued conversations and responsible drinking behavior by the adults in their lives as youth grow up, there is less chance that youth will be tempted by peer pressure to begin drinking in high school. The earlier youth drink, the more likely they are to become alcohol-dependent and to drive drunk later in life. "We need to limit access, increase enforcement, notify parents, and schools need to follow the Safe and Drug-Free Schools Act for protecting their students," Levy says.

"I just didn't know I was basically the only one really dedicated to protecting my son, and I was hundreds of miles away from him," says Levy. "I still hear those words, 'trust me, Dad, I know better' and I did trust him. But the effect of alcohol on human

behavior, especially adolescent behavior, is such that trust is not the issue. Protect your children. Learn about the social culture on campus, find out what the alcohol policies, consequences and notification procedures are. Make absolutely certain you are confident your son or daughter can handle the environment."

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