

Keeping kids safe: Bennington works to strengthen community

By Michael J. Card

Governor Howard Dean was on hand at a community luncheon yesterday at the Bennington Country Club to speak on issues of teen safety and to celebrate a \$73,000 federal grant awarded to the district last year under the Drug Free Communities Juvenile Justice Program.

The juvenile justice program targets communities who are doing something about teen safety and seeks to reduce teen substance abuse, change prevalent, permissive, adult attitudes toward teen substance abuse, and increase cooperation and collaboration among many groups all working toward the same goal.

Throughout Vermont, underage drinking, drug use, violence, drinking and driving, suicide and dropouts plague many communities. However, in the past six years, Bennington community members have collaborated to bring more options and outlets so young people have choices other than hanging out and engaging in self-destructive behavior. They're one of two communities cited by the University of Vermont for having "turned the numbers around."

A collaborative turnaround

Southwestern Vermont Supervisory Union (SVSU) Superintendent Thomas Gallagher said when he moved to Bennington in 1994 to become superintendent, he was concerned with some of the things he saw. "I came here in August, 1994, and less than one week later, two children were killed in a car accident on East Road. ... That struck me as being something very profound."

Then, a few months later, Gallagher was given a copy of a Youth Risk Behavior Survey that had surveyed sixth through twelfth graders in Bennington schools. "I read it cover to cover and was somewhat shocked by the things that I found."

According to Gallagher, some statistics in 1994 for Southshire area students include:

- 58 percent of eighth graders, and 46 percent of all children, had been threatened with some sort of physical violence during the past school year;
- 56 percent of all students consumed at least one drink of alcohol within the past month;
- 35 percent of all students had been involved in binge drinking;
- 79 percent had consumed alcohol; "probably what was most appalling to me was that many of those youngsters were getting their supply from their own homes, and sometimes with the blessings of the adults in their lives," Gallagher said;
- 28 percent of students had smoked cigarettes before age 13;
- 38 percent had smoked marijuana; 14 percent before age 13;
- 36 percent had ridden in a car with someone who had been drinking.

• 32 percent of all students had "seriously considered" suicide; 24 percent had actually made a plan to kill themselves; 12 percent had actually attempted suicide, and 6 percent had been hospitalized for a suicide attempt.

"We started to say 'what can we do about this,' because addressing some of the other issues of curriculum were really not as important as some of these things that were actually appalling and alarming to us," said Gallagher. Soon after, Gallagher invited community members to a dinner to discuss these issues. "What I was struck by was the level of concern that the community had for those very same issues and I suddenly started to feel very unimportant because of the number of ideas and brains in the room and what they felt could be done."

This multiplicity of concern and collaboration has influenced area teens to lead healthier lifestyles. They feel as if there are more opportunities for them and as if their voice is important, Gallagher said.

He outlined some of the outreach, recreation and mentoring programs that have evolved during the past six years. The first was called a Partnership for a Healthier Southshire, which set up teen after-school programs. "Collaboration started to become the key word among community members," said Gallagher. "And I saw that happen; I saw people willing to set their own agendas aside to work toward what we felt was most important: changing some of those numbers around."

This turnaround has not been without its pitfalls, and the job is nowhere near done, said Gallagher, who remembered feeling "frustration" when automobile accidents in 1996-97 led to three more teen deaths. Each of these accidents involved alcohol.

Gallagher said the most important thing adults can do for young people is listen to them. By listening (which is not the same thing as approving, or agreeing), adults let kids know that they're important and that they

mean something. He said there is overwhelming evidence that some of the most memorable experiences a person has during school is when a teacher asks him/her for assistance — "when they felt important."

Another problem Gallagher addressed is the "embarrassingly high" dropout rate at the high school: one out of every four freshmen will not graduate. He pointed to evidence that shows a high percentage of prison inmates are former dropouts, a correlation that he said is "higher than the correlation between smoking and cancer." Truancy is a related issue; it leads to dropouts. Gallagher said the argument, "some kids will just drop out because school is not for them," only exacerbates the problem. He said in the long run, it will cost society much more if it gives up on its kids: "it costs five times as much to send someone to the state pen[itentiary] as it does to Penn State."

Gallagher pointed out two Bennington College faculty members, Susan Sgorbati and Dan Michaelson, who approached him wanting to help students at risk of dropping out. The school picked 29 children that it was most concerned about, and Gallagher said "28 are still in school — the 29th moved." The program has been remarkably effective.

Gallagher lauded the efforts of former educators Jean Wassick and Rebecca Shepherd, who have come back into the school community and served as quiet mentors.

He thanked Andy Smith for building a BMX bike course, which has been used by hundreds of youngsters in the past few years.

He thanked police Sgt. Ron Elwell for initiating a Tuesday night self-defense course, which now has more than 200 students.

He thanked psychiatrist and Harvard University professor Robert Brooks for "telling us over and over ... how important an adult's intervention is on a child's life."

"You cannot lecture your kids about smoking pot if you're on your third Scotch."

Dean applauds efforts

Gov. Dean said communicating honestly with our kids is the most important effort parents can make to strengthen their relationships. Dean said from the youth summit last August, "that was the main message, it was all about respect ... but it was mostly about listening."

"I think the message that we often give to kids is that their opinions don't matter — I know kids certainly feel that way." He said listening to kids is different than letting them do whatever they want. "The message that we have to listen is different. Listening does not connote approval, and it does not connote permission, and it does not even connote agreement."

"Part of the problem is time," said Dean. "There's an awful lot of families now either that are headed by a single parent who is struggling who may have to work two jobs to keep the household together, or even families headed by two parents, neither one of whom has the time. That makes it very, very difficult."

Dean said parents have to be role models: "you cannot lecture your kids about smoking pot if you're on your third Scotch." He said even small things, such as driving a car after having even one drink, will send the wrong message. "Kids are incredibly sensitive to hypocrisy."

"Our words and actions have an enormous impact on kids, even if we don't think they're listening... they get it. They understand our point, even if they may not agree with it."

"We have to be willing to admit to our kids that sometimes we do the wrong thing. Because they know it's wrong; nobody's fooling anybody, so what's the sense in not just saying it?"

"Our words and actions have an enormous impact on kids, even if we don't think they're listening. ... They get it. They understand our point, even if they may not agree with it. Now, we have to do the same for them. When

they're in our face, we have to listen to what is really is that they're saying."

Dean said team building is important to establishing respect and confidence. "I don't think it's a coincidence that everybody here is involved in sports. ... It keeps people busy, and it builds teamwork, and it introduces them to the school in a way that you can't just do sitting in front of a teacher."

Dean said newspapers often only play stories that deal with teens in trouble, and pointed out that the *Burlington Free Press* runs a weekly feature on kids doing good things in their community. "There are so many good kids doing wonderful things across this state."

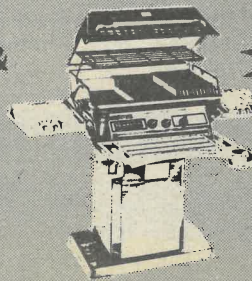
"Outcomes and benchmarks are very important," he added. "You've got to see that what you're doing works."

Gallagher cautioned guests "not to step back and admire our work just yet. ... We still have a higher number of risk-taking behaviors in our youth than the rest of Vermont," he said. "Our rates are really probably higher than that because of our high dropout rate is so high, we're not really interviewing students who are out of school. The one thing I can say now is that we know what we need to do, and I'm certainly more optimistic now than I was six years ago."

See related story, page 11.

SELLING ONLY THE BEST IN GAS GRILLS!

Assembled & Delivered w/Full Tank of Propane



We stock parts for most grills



Spring BBQ Cleaning \$59

Family Owned For Over 45 Years

H. A. GEORGE FUEL CO.

PROPANE KEROSENE FUEL OIL DIESEL

651 Ashland St., North Adams, Mass. 413 663-6652 • Fax 413-663-8791

Why should you want to join Clickshare?

(See our recruitment ad on page 25)

To be part of something revolutionary. Because on the Internet, traditional publishers, entertainment companies, new-media portals, banks, telcos and retailers are all battling to see who can amass the greatest number of "eyeballs." It's a battle nobody's winning.

Clickshare Service Corp. aims to change the rules of engagement with our customer-relationship exchange. Instead of fighting to steal each others' users, with Clickshare the combatants can share their customers and their content, creating new revenue streams beyond advertising.

The winner will be consumers, who will have more freedom to enjoy music, video, words and software with one-ID, one-account ease, control over the sharing of their private demographic data (no more "cookies" required!) and a home-base "infomediary" for personalized service.

In short, Clickshare is making the market for digital content exchange.

Now, with a solid management team and early funding in place, Clickshare is ready to turn the content exchange vision into reality. If you respond to our recruitment ad, you may be one of the first 10 colleagues at a company which supplies the missing link to the digital-information economy -- a way to make money.

To learn more, email jobs@clickshare.com. Don't worry whether you have the right credentials. The window's closing too fast.

Clickshare®

"Making the market for digital information"

Clickshare Service Corporation

75 Water Street / Williamstown

: (413) 458-8001 / jobs@clickshare.com

BENNINGTON HOUSE OF TILE & CARPET

For All Your Flooring Needs see us at the 2000 HOME & HEALTH EXPO

Fri Apr 28 Noon to 5 pm
Sat Apr 29 10 am to 8 pm
Sun Apr 30 10 am to 5 pm

at the Green Mountain Race Track, Pownal, VT

RT 7A, Harwood Hill, Bennington, VT
802-442-2494, Fax 802-447-3395
Mon.-Fri. 7a.m.-6 p.m. • Sat. 9 a.m.-4 p.m.