

Acting against alcohol, students get TIPS certified

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Most teenagers dislike role-playing. Ralph DiMatteo knows that.

But he forced a few of the Riverside High students to act anyway.

"It'll look really good for them on a college application," he said.

DiMatteo soon would help about 100 junior and senior student mentors earn three-year certifications in alcohol awareness education, which he said many colleges now require for entry.

The Painesville Township resident has an enthusiastic personality, high school- and college-aged kids, background in the wholesale beer business and 15 years as certified alcohol awareness instructor with the international Training for Intervention Procedures (TIPS) Program based in Arlington, Va.

That arsenal of knowledge has helped him modify TIPS' three-hour college-gear program for high-schoolers. Fueled by interest from Riverside Principal Bill Wade, he clearly connected with some of his students Wednesday and Friday. Those who correctly answered 14 of 20 test questions walked away certified; the rest got \$13 manuals courtesy of Riverside Local Excellence for Education Foundation.

Health Communications Inc. officially offers nine specialized TIPS programs — six for servers and sellers and three for consumers. The company has toyed with the idea of doing a high school specific program for years, Vice President Trevor Estelle said.

"The program doesn't focus on the drinker, it focuses on the people who will be around the drinker, empowering them to do something to prevent a tragedy, drunk driving, or a situation that might result from alcohol," he added.

Meanwhile instructors across the country have created their own pilot versions. DiMatteo strives to talk and discuss, not lecture.

"It's an interactive atmosphere," he said. "We need to treat them like adults in a way that says we understand this is going on, and there are more of you out there who aren't experimenting with alcohol, and we need your help to change the culture."

Friday's role-playing used real Riverside examples Wade had provided from this year — students drinking in the school parking lot, at homecoming, at football games, in prom limousines and at house parties.

"After seeing this I need to take you aside," said a male role-player to a "drunk" girl dancing silly at a party. He moved her away to spare her the embarrassment of being addressed in front of her peers. "Your eyes are glossed. Are you drunk?"

"No," she said. "Honestly, are you?" he replied. She hesitated. "Maybe a little bit." He then persuaded her not to drink for the rest of the night.

To change the culture, DiMatteo said he and Wade hope to provide school-sponsored activities, such as hosting post-game concerts or tailgate parties, as alternatives for underage drinking situations. DiMatteo worked with Miller Brewing Co. sponsorships before becoming a "responsibility initiative designee," he said, and hopes to attract sponsorship for this as well. He and Wade also have written a grant to get all seniors certified in the fall.

"There's a whole lot of ways we can get more publicity for what's right and less for what's wrong; we need to make what's right look more attractive," he said.

For more information on DiMatteo, visit www.ralphdimatteo.com.