

[http://www.courant.com/news/opinion/op\\_ed/hc-freshwalsh0330.artmar30,0,5145421.story](http://www.courant.com/news/opinion/op_ed/hc-freshwalsh0330.artmar30,0,5145421.story)

## Underage Drinking - And Dying

Jessica Walsh

March 30 2007

At this very moment, there are more than 100 girls in the Kappa Alpha Theta Sorority at the University of Connecticut who are desperately trying to pick up the pieces after the tragic death of one of their sisters. Nineteen-year-old Carlee Wines was hit and killed by an underage, allegedly drunken driver in late January. Her death affected the entire UConn community, especially the Greek community. Being a member of the Greek community, I watched Carlee's sorority sisters and friends fall apart in the aftermath of her death; one of her sisters is also one of my best friends.

This young woman's life was taken away from her apparently because of a drug which college students all across this country abuse frequently and haphazardly. Alcohol is the drug of choice for American teenagers. It is also the drug most likely to be associated with injury or death.

Approximately five college students are killed every day as a result of alcohol-related injuries. These college students whose lives have been taken away from them were sisters, brothers, daughters and sons. They were friends, they were loved by many, and most important, many were innocent victims.

The nightmarish pain and suffering that these people's deaths leave their families and friends with is immeasurable. Lauren Zuckerman, a senior member of Kappa Alpha Theta at UConn, is distraught over Carlee's death. "Imagine making plans with someone for the next week and then having a drunk driver take them away from you," she said. "She was someone who I treated like my little sister. You can never get that type of friendship back."

As the immediate shock of Carlee's death fades, college students, specifically UConn students, are finding it easier to forget the circumstances of her death and continue binge drinking regularly. It is not enough to recognize the problem of youth alcohol abuse in this country only for a short while following this type of tragedy. We must recognize that underage drinking is a critical public health issue that needs to be addressed every day of the year.

In Connecticut children begin drinking alcohol as early as 11 years old. This is two years below the national average. We must work to stop alcohol abuse at an early age so that it is not a problem youths will carry with them to our college and university campuses. According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, young adults age 18 to 22 who are enrolled full time in college are more likely than their peers who are not enrolled in college full time, to binge drink.

Alcohol abuse comes with a wide range of short-term risks, including alcohol poisoning and traffic accidents, but there also exists a high risk of alcohol dependence as an adult, as well as detrimental physical and neurological effects. Underage drinking is a problem that can begin to be solved by dedication from parents, schools, communities and our youth.

Underage drinking weaves a web of tragedy. I see the framed picture of my friend Lauren and Carlee sitting on Lauren's desk and I realize how easily it could have been one of my sorority sisters who lost her life, or one of my family members, or even me. No one is safe from someone else's poor decision making when under the influence. It is our responsibility to make sure the poor decisions are not made in the first place. It is your responsibility.

The pleading in Lauren's voice makes this tragedy all too real to me when she says, "People need to take responsibility for the choices they make and they need to understand that one person's bad decision under the influence of alcohol can affect others. Alcohol took a sister away from over 100 girls; it took my sister away from me. Forever."

Make the decision to support the fight against underage drinking. Do it for your brothers and sisters. Do it for your sons and daughters. Do it for everyone who struggles to go on after someone they love has been taken away from them.

Jessica Walsh, 21, is a senior at the University of Connecticut, majoring in English. She is a media intern at the Governor's Prevention Partnership in Hartford.