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## Sylacaugans gather for 'Real Talk in the Park'

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by Mark Ledbetter  
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SYLACAUGA — Cheaha Regional Mental Health Center teamed up with Charter Media, B.B. Comer High School and several area churches to present “Real Talk in the Park,” a program to promote Alcohol Awareness Month.

People gathered at Noble Park were treated to free food, door prizes, music and a motivational speech by Martin Houston, former University of Alabama star fullback of the 1992 National Championship Team.

The National Council on Alcoholism and Drugs began Alcohol Awareness Month in 1987 “to increase public awareness and understanding aimed at reducing the stigma that too often prevents individuals from seeking help.”

According to the NCAD, the program is designed to “reach out in communities across the country to bring the American public information about alcohol and alcoholism as a chronic, progressive disease, fatal if untreated, and genetically predisposed.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported there are “approximately 79,000 deaths attributed to excessive alcohol use each year in the United States,” the third leading lifestyle related cause of death in the nation.

Richard Bonds, Prevention Services coordinator at Cheaha Mental Health Center, said underage drinking in the area is “near epidemic.”

A recent Pride Survey, a national survey measuring substance use and abuse in schools, shows the average age of area students who admitted to drinking alcohol was 10.2 years. The survey reported that 12.8 percent of sixth-graders drink, while 71.4 percent of seniors surveyed admitted to drinking. Significant spikes were reported in the eighth-, 10th- and 12th-grades.

Bonds said there has been an increase in girls involved in risky behavior and alcohol. “What we thought boys used to do, now the girls are doing,” he said.

Bonds said juveniles who began drinking at age 15 are six times more likely to become alcoholics.

He said that while talking to the kids has some effect, the greater results come from changing the mindset of parents. Parents who allow “Social Hosting” are not doing their children and friends any favors, Bonds said. The excuses parents give is that their kids are going to drink anyway so they will supervise their drinking.

What they are teaching their child, Bonds said, is that it is “OK to break the law,” and they are putting their children at risk.

Bonds said there is a good reason for Alabama setting the legal age for drinking at 21. The part of the brain that determines behavior fully develops at ages 25-26, he said. Drinking impairs rational thinking and when you add the use of alcohol, it's understandable why so many young drinkers make wrong decisions.

Part of Bonds' responsibility is going to schools to talk to kids about the dangers of underage drinking.

“Real Talk in the Park” is part of Cheaha's approach to alert parents and children of the dangers of underage drinking and alcohol abuse.

Charter Media set up equipment for the viewing of a movie, while local churches contributed food and beverages. Bobby Davis, director of The King's Kitchen (The Sanctuary), said they cooked 200 hamburgers and 180 hot dogs Friday night.

First United Methodist Church of Sylacauga, Pine Grove Baptist and other area churches contributed food, snacks and water. The B.B. Comer High School Jazz Band performed.

Houston gave a motivational speech using a popular pop expression, “let's get buzzed,” but with a new twist to the expression to emphasize the dangers of alcohol abuse.

The major points of Houston's speech were:

- Be the best you can be.
- Don't underestimate the effects of alcohol.
- Zero tolerance for alcohol use.
- Be zealous in your commitment.
- Empower yourself by the right choices.
- Destiny — alcohol can have an adverse effect on the individual's destiny he was created to fulfill.

About 200 people attended the event.