

# THE UNCONSCIOUS TRUTH

## TYLA INITIATIVE ADDRESSES UNDERAGE BINGE DRINKING

BY ELLEN CARNES

In February, the Texas Young Lawyers Association (TYLA) unveiled *The Unconscious Truth: Physical and Legal Effects of Underage Binge Drinking*. The new initiative is designed to educate adults and teenagers about the consequences — both physical and legal — of underage binge drinking.

“We wanted to make young adults and their parents aware of the liabilities,” said TYLA Community Education Committee Chair **Brooke Ulrickson Allen**. “Not only the legal liabilities involved with underage binge drinking, but also the more tragic physical consequences, like death or permanent brain damage, that can result from alcohol poisoning.”

TYLA President **Natalie Cobb Koehler** first became interested in the issue of underage binge drinking last year, when she read about the 2008 death of Shelby Allen. Allen was a vivacious and articulate 17-year old — an athlete and an honor student whose personal motto was “Dig life.” On the first night of winter break, Allen attended a party at a friend’s house where she drank 15 shots of vodka. When she became ill and passed out, her friends let her “sleep it off.” In the morning, Allen was pronounced dead. The cause was acute alcohol poisoning.

Binge drinking is generally defined as consuming five or more drinks for males and four drinks or more for females during a two-hour time window. A standard measurement for a drink is 14 grams of pure alcohol — a 12-ounce beer contains one standard drink; a bottle of wine contains five.

According to a January 2012 report by the Centers for Disease Control, more than 38 million American adults binge drink regularly. Binge drinking is a leading preventable cause of death in the United States and is responsible for more than half of the 79,000 excessive drinking-related deaths each year.

Teenagers are following the example set by adults. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, in 2008, 2.3 million people between the ages of 12 and 20 engaged in binge drinking five or more times per month.

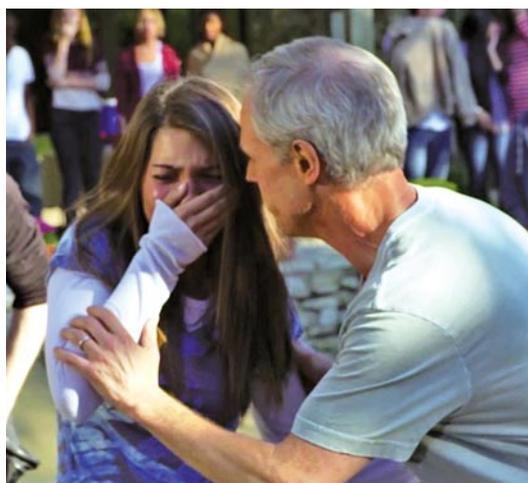
The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism has called out colleges and universities for cultivating a “culture of drinking.”

Alcohol poisoning occurs when a person’s blood alcohol concentration becomes dangerously elevated, which can slow — or stop — involuntary actions such as breathing, heart beat, and gag reflex. “Death by alcohol poisoning is very preventable,” said Steven L. Smith, M.D., F.A.C.P., of the Medical Clinic of North Texas. “If a friend calls 911 in time, the person can be intubated and given intravenous fluids. As long as the hospital can keep them breathing through the night, they’re usually fine. That’s why it’s so important to know the signs of alcohol poisoning.”

After learning about the devastating impact of alcohol poisoning on the Allens’ lives, Koehler decided that TYLA could help educate communities about the consequences of binge drinking. She reached out to Allen’s parents, Steve and Debbie Allen, who run Shelby’s Rules, an alcohol poisoning education foundation. The Allens worked with Koehler, Ulrickson, and the rest of the TYLA Community Education Committee to create *The Unconscious Truth*. “They have been a huge help with this endeavor and we are very thankful for their guidance,” Koehler said.

The project consists of a 15-minute video loosely based on the circumstances of Allen’s death and a discussion portion,

where TYLA members can engage teenagers in a debate about the laws and consequences related to underage binge drinking. Also included in the program is information about Texas Sen-



Scenes from *The Unconscious Truth*

ate Bill 1331, the “911 lifeline” law that grants immunity from prosecution to 911 callers who suspect someone is suffering from alcohol poisoning. The bill was sponsored by Sen. **Kirk Watson**, a former TYLA president.

The video follows “Hannah,” a high school student who is throwing a party. With her parents’ permission, beer is being served. “We just don’t want you drinking and then getting into a car and hurting yourself and/or someone else,” Hannah’s father says. “We’d rather have you be here, in a controlled environment where nobody can get hurt.”

After Hannah’s parents go to bed, Hannah breaks into their liquor cabinet. Eventually, Hannah’s friend “Shelby” has too much to drink, falls unconscious, and is found dead in the morning. The video ends with the possibility of criminal charges for Hannah and her parents.

*The Unconscious Truth* not only takes pains to point out the signs of alcohol poisoning — stupor, vomiting, seizure, slow or irregular breathing, pale skin, low body temperature, and unconsciousness — but to raise questions about responsibility. After the video, students are asked questions like, “If you were

a criminal prosecutor, what criminal offenses, if any, would you charge Hannah and her parents with?” TYLA has partnered with the VITALS program at Texas Christian University, a campaign to promote alcohol poisoning awareness. Together, they hope to take *The Unconscious Truth* to college campuses nationwide, with specific guided discussions relating to each state’s statutes. TYLA will also be presenting *The Unconscious Truth* at the Texas Law-Related Education conference in February.

“We walked a fine line with this project,” Ulrickson Allen said. “We obviously don’t want to condone or endorse underage drinking, but at the same time, we know this happens and we want people to be aware of the potential dangers. Our hope is that this project could save the life of someone like Shelby Allen.”

*The Unconscious Truth* will be available online at [tyla.org](http://tyla.org) and on DVD. If you would like a copy for your school, contact the TYLA office at (800) 204-2222, ext. 1529.

**ELLEN CARNES**

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## INFORMATION ON ALCOHOL ABUSE

### KNOW THE SIGNS OF ALCOHOL POISONING

Alcohol poisoning occurs when someone has consumed more alcohol than his or her body can safely metabolize. The VITALS program encourages students to use the acronym “VITALS” to remember the primary signs of alcohol poisoning:

- Vomiting
- Incoherence
- Temperature
- Absence of color
- Lack of response
- Seizure

Call 911 right away if you suspect alcohol poisoning.

### TEXAS LAWYERS’ ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

The Texas Lawyers’ Assistance Program (TLAP) provides confidential help for lawyers, law students, and judges who have problems with substance abuse and/or mental health issues. TLAP’s experienced and professional staff is available by phone and email to answer your questions about substance abuse, mental health, and wellness issues. You may place a confidential phone call to TLAP at any time of day or night at (800) 343-8527.

### THE TRUTH ABOUT TEENAGE DRINKING

- According to a 2008 survey, 92 percent of 12th graders, 81 percent of 10th graders, and 64 percent of 8th graders reported that alcohol would be “fairly easy” or “very easy” to obtain.
- 65 percent of 10- to 18-year-olds who have consumed alcohol report that family and friends are the leading source from which they get alcohol.
- According to a 2005 survey, 84 percent of college students had drunk alcohol in their lifetime.
- 66 percent of college students had drunk alcohol in the past month.
- Almost 30 percent of college students reported binge drinking.
- 58 percent of college students ages 18 to 20 reported drinking an alcoholic beverage in the past month.
- 74 percent of youth report that their parents are the primary factor in their decision to drink or not drink.

Statistics from the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission, [www.tabc.state.tx.us](http://www.tabc.state.tx.us).