

Submission for Commentary
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There is an ill wind blowing through our town. It steals our hope, and the childhood and energy of our kids, and it steals our strength to build our families and our future. It takes our jobs and it takes food from the mouths of our children, and it leaves us sick and frail, too weak to care for ourselves and the people we love.

We don't talk about the elephant in the living room, and we quickly sidestep the difficult questions it raises as we go about our lives, and step around the corpses of its victims.

If this ill wind was the Black Death, or an oil spill on our beaches, or another Tillamook Burn, we would rise up in the streets, and fight this disaster head on, with all of our collective energies and resources.

But we don't. Once in a while, after one of our youth is killed in an alcohol-soaked crash, or there is a serious assault or homicide caused by booze, we wring our hands and bemoan the prevalence and power of alcohol abuse in our town. But, a few weeks later, the topic of conversation changes, and we go on.

Over 300 people are arrested in our county each year for DUII, and yet people still refer to this crime as "getting a ticket", and say "well, it's just a DUII."

Yet, this wind blows deeper and deadlier into the heart of our community. Our grade school kids tell us that 12% of them have been drunk at a party, 37% started drinking when they were nine or ten years old, and half have ridden in a car driven by a drunk. And, 4% of these kids report they've been too hung over to make it to school.

The numbers get worse in junior high: 14% drink on a weekly basis; 23% binge drink (more than five drinks) and 8% binge drink monthly. 85% think drinking and driving is a serious community problem.

And, high school kids: By age 14, 44% have used alcohol; 12% have driven drunk themselves; and 19% of our kids have been injured when they are drinking.

The numbers go on and on, and we could all point fingers or wring our hands at these tragic numbers.

Or, we could applaud and cheer, as so many of us did at this year's Tillamook High School graduation, where the student speaker was bragging about her "graduation MIP" as a rite of passage, and a large part of the audience responded with applause and cheers. I was there, and I wept for my town.

Every day, I see the faces and the wreckage of under aged drinking, and the personal costs of our society's acceptance of alcohol abuse. I see kids dropping out of school, not applying themselves to build healthy families and find productive work, and to raise their own kids. I see their bruises, and their already long driving and criminal records. And with some, I see their meth sores and heroin needle marks, but all of those kids tell me it started with booze.

I see their young faces as they walk the chain gang through the courthouse on the way to criminal court, and more jail time. I read their names on the jail roster every morning.

Kids tell me all time of their loss of hope, the emptiness of their family life, their yearning to find a safe place to be with their friends, and their hunger for a meaningful, productive life. Our kids in trouble have good values, and they want to succeed. They need our help in beating this ill wind, and to put this storm to rest.

Many of us are working to beat this crisis, and stop this ill wind from blowing through our town, and we try to stop the stealing of lives, and the slaying of hope and the young dreams of our youth. There are many who feel this storm for what it is. I see you in the courthouse hallways, and I see you in

our churches and our streets and in our schools. I see you in the back of the courtroom weeping as your man-child deals with his charges. I see you placing yet another cross by the side of the road. And, I know there are many conversations around the dinner table.

Our community is rich in resources. We have great health care providers, counselors, and self help groups, and there are nightly meetings of people in recovery. Yes, we've come a long way since I was a kid myself in this town. I've seen some good changes.

And, I wear the scars of this storm in my own heart. The statistics are more than numbers for me; they are counted in my friends, neighbors, family, and people who have been in my court who have fallen from this storm. Like you, I know the names on the roadside crosses. We all have these scars and we are all in pain.

And, yet, there is a great silence. After last June's flurry of articles and discussion on that graduation speech, the public clamor died down. And, since then, more people have died, more people have been assaulted, more people have driven drunk, more people have gone to jail, and more kids have started drinking. There is a Trail of Tears running through our town, and we need to bind our wounds, and set a new course for how we live, and how our children are raised.

I'm a believer in the rule of law, and the law as a statement of our community values and dreams. And, I'd better believe that. You have entrusted me to be a judge, and to be fair and apply justice. Yet, as I go about my work to enforce the law and to change behavior, I am often left at the end of a day on the bench feeling like the Dutch boy holding his finger in the dike.

It is time, my neighbors, for all of us to rise up, and to be angry about this ill wind, and to find horror in the message we are getting from our young people. Our kids see alcohol abuse as a very serious problem. It is time that we listen to what our kids are saying.

It is time to be outraged. It is time to talk about the elephant in our town's living room.