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ABSOLUTE CONSENT:

An Advocate's Perspective on Alcohol & Rape
By Jennie E. Seigler, Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape

Ms. Seigler represents the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape in the Campus/Community Partnership, a program organized by the Pennsylvania Liquor Control Board to reduce the harmful and destructive consequences of underage and excessive drinking on college campuses.

This summer Pennsylvanians Against Underage Drinking, a fellow partner in the initiative, launched a related "Unintended Consequences" campaign to alert youth to the dangers of underage and excessive drinking, including the increased risk of sexual victimization. For more information on the link between alcohol and sexual assault, please visit www.alcoholfreeyouth.org and www.pcar.org.

Picture it: young, attractive people having a great time with old friends. I'm not talking about the famous NBC sitcom; I am referring to prime-time alcohol advertising. Advertisements portraying great looking, scantily-clad people having a wonderful, carefree time, without any consequences. What about the aftermath of alcohol consumption? Did you ever see a commercial illustrate to viewers the vomiting and hangovers after a night of heavy drinking? What about the woman waking up in an unfamiliar setting only to discover she was sexually violated while passed out? Alcohol-related sexual assault is a consequence of drinking that the advertising industry does not display in their attempts to attract young consumers.

Here are the facts about alcohol and sexual violence: 90% of acquaintance rape involves alcohol. And it is estimated that each year 600,000 college students are assaulted by a student who has been drinking; 70,000 of those students are victims of alcohol-related sexual assault. Let me be clear, alcohol by itself does not cause sexual assault. However, the desire to commit sexual assault can sometimes lead to excessive alcohol consumption. This leads us to the ever-popular, "I was drunk" excuse. If I robbed a bank, I couldn't proclaim my innocence because "I was drunk when I did it." Why then do we allow rapists to use this excuse time and time again? Especially since rapists frequently report getting a woman drunk in order to have sex with her.

Over the past three years, I have developed and presented a workshop at local, state and national conferences entitled "When Alcohol is the Weapon: The Link Between Alcohol & Sexual Assault." After each presentation, I always feel energized and encouraged by the exchange with the workshop participants who are, a majority of the time, college students and are just as appalled by this epidemic as I am. That, however, is not always the case. Sometimes a student can be a victim's worst advocate.

A few months ago an article appeared in a local newspaper bringing attention to seven rapes that occurred on a small college campus in rural Pennsylvania. In that article a female student was quoted as saying some people were angry with the women who reported the assaults. "It put a

black mark on the Greek system,” she said in reference to several of the incidents which occurred at fraternity houses. “The girls should have been more responsible. They were drinking.”

The girls should have been more responsible? I had to read that section again. Did she say what I think she said? Unfortunately, she is not alone. Women who drink in bars often criticize or blame other women for behavior that may lead to sexual victimization. What about placing the blame where it belongs, on the rapist? If I am enjoying a glass of wine either with friends or alone, do I give up my right to say “NO”? According to some, I do. And that leads us to another ugly consequence of alcohol-related sexual assault – women who drink alcohol are often perceived as promiscuous and readily available for sexual aggression. In an era of equality, gender and drinking are far from equals.

I can’t blame this one single college student for all of my outrage. This wasn’t the first time victims of sexual violence were blamed for being raped. The problem is much larger than one person. The problem is with a whole society of men and women whose ignorance will continue to hurt victims unless we raise awareness of alcohol-related sexual assault. My hope is that combined alcohol education and sexual assault awareness programs become the prevention cornerstone. Who knows, the alcohol industry might even acknowledge that drunk driving is not the only consequence of excessive drinking.

The Campus/Community Partnership is active in your area, at [insert college name]. To learn about the initiative, contact your local rape crisis center – [insert center name] – at [insert phone number].

– or –

To learn what is being done in your community to address the correlation between alcohol and sexual assault, contact your local rape crisis center – [insert center name] – at [insert phone number].