



SAD 17 Superintendent Kenneth Smith and Commissioner Harold Reynolds, Jr. display poster designed for Project Graduation.

How it began

When the Drug and Alcohol Team of Oxford Hills (DATOH) decided to organize an alcohol-free party for their 1980 high school graduates, a lot of people felt it wouldn't work. Skeptics pointed out that many young people looked upon drinking as a traditional way of celebrating graduation and some parents also accepted this fact even though they tried to discourage it. Some even went so far as to buy kegs of beer for graduation parties in the hope that their kids would celebrate near home and that they, as parents, would have control of the ensuing activities.

"We felt that an alcohol-free party would offer kids an alternative," says former DATOH coordinator Sue Bell in referring to the event that marked the highlight of Oxford Hills' 1980 Project Graduation. The party was organized by a committee of Oxford Hills students with the assistance of DATOH members.

Several alcohol-related crashes that claimed the lives of seven area teenagers the year before were still fresh in the minds of Oxford Hills residents. "We were determined that such a thing would not occur during the 1980 commencement period," recalls Miss Bell, now a member of the Maine House of Representatives.

Contrary to dire predictions, the Oxford Hills chemical-free party held in June of 1980 was an unqualified success. High school seniors showed up in large numbers and enjoyed such activities as racquetball, sauna, ping pong, and dancing to the sound of a live band. No incidents marred what turned out to be a most enjoyable and entertaining evening for all concerned.

"This was a landmark for the state in reducing the number of alcohol-related traffic accidents and fatalities at graduation time," notes Carl Mowatt, director of the Unit for Alcohol and Drug Education, Department of Educational and Cultural Services.

Money and food for this, Maine's first organized chemically-free graduation party, was donated by various local businesses, parents, and individuals in the community. Additional support came from the Bureau of Safety of the Department of Transportation, the Unit for Alcohol and Drug Education and WCSH-TV in Portland which featured the Oxford Hills project during a special week of programming in June of 1980.

The 1981 Oxford Hills graduation party was an even bigger success than last year's with 240 students in attendance and 20 volunteer hosts and hostesses. Carol Bryant, chairperson for this year's Project Graduation party notes with enthusiasm that community support was greater than during the previous year. "Everybody supported it," she says. "We were able to raise \$985 to cover expenses. Oxford Hills can be proud of its kids and a community that cares enough to contribute so generously to Project Graduation."

Project Graduation

This year, Oxford Hills was no longer alone in organizing an alcohol-free graduation party. More than 10 other communities picked up on the idea as a result of intensive efforts by state and local education officials, local school and community teams dedicated to combatting alcohol/drug abuse, and the Maine news media.

Graduation festivities were organized in Augusta, Bethel, Cape Elizabeth, Farmington, Gardiner, Guilford, Hallowell-Farmingdale, Washburn, Waterville and Wiscasset. In each instance, schools and communities worked together to make the parties a success. Following are some of the highlights:

Chemical-free graduation parties are an idea whose time has come

"I have never been so high in my life," comments Principal Bob Whytock of Cony High School when asked about his experience on the Casco Bay cruise held June 16 for Augusta's graduating seniors. A total of 248 students and 22 chaperones celebrated from midnight to 7 a.m. when they put in to Peaks Island for breakfast before returning home. This activity was promoted by the Augusta Drug and Alcohol Prevention Team (A.D.A.P.T.) under the leadership of Father Jim Michaud.

Excerpts from a letter sent by Cape Elizabeth High School Principal Romeo Marquis to Education Commissioner Harold Reynolds, Jr. clearly reflect Mr. Marquis' sentiments concerning Project Graduation at his school. Cape Elizabeth's team is called C.A.P.A.S. (Community Action Plans Against Substance Abuse).

"Our prom was a tremendous experience which was not accompanied by the usual alcohol-related problems. It was held at the Ramada Inn. Our substance abuse team had done some exemplary work. Our Senior Banquet was also held at the Ramada Inn and the results were essentially the same. The high point of all this was the reception held for the graduates on Friday evening. It was sponsored by our substance abuse team and supported by the school system, parents' association and the community. It was paid for by

voluntary contributions from parents and friends. It was held at the Crescent Beach Inn in Cape Elizabeth and was attended by over 400 graduates, faculty, parents, and friends. Teachers, kids, and parents were socializing in a manner in which I have never observed in this community."

The drug committee for the SAD 9 (Farmington) "Dry High" Graduation party was pleased with the turnout and considered its first no-alcohol graduation party very successful. Approximately 235 seniors and guests attended. Underclassmen in attendance expressed hope that similar parties will be planned for their graduations.

A total of 175 seniors from Gardiner Area High School attended a chemical-free boat party lasting from 11 p.m. June 4, 1981 until 8 o'clock the following morning. Chaperones reported the entire evening passed without negative incident and the students conducted themselves in the manner of polite, responsible young adults.

In Guilford, Piscataquis Community High School seniors celebrated with a chemical-free party that included a barbecue followed by a dance. Sixty-three of the eighty-two seniors attended. Indications are that the same type of party will be held for next year's graduating class.

The American Legion Hall in Augusta was the setting for the Hall-Dale High School graduation party attended by 175-200 students. Feedback from youth after the party indicated it was the most fun they had ever had. Adults said it was the easiest event they had ever chaperoned. The next day, kids began volunteering to be on the committee for next year's party as word of the event spread throughout the school. H.A.D.I.T. (Hall-Dale Alcohol and Drug Information Team) can take credit for this event.

The local Rotary and substance abuse team coordinated the graduation party for Washburn District High School graduates. Over half the graduating seniors attended with their dates. Feedback from youth and parents was very positive.

The Waterville High School Senior Class Cruise on Casco Bay was held on June 12. According to chaperones who accompanied 171 of 199 graduates, the event was counted a success by both graduates and adult hosts.

A thank you dinner for teachers past and

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Project Graduation

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present and an alcohol-free graduation party June 11 were the two hallmarks of School Union 48's graduation festivities. The party was held at Boothbay Harbor YMCA following the commencement program and began with a lobster, steak and clambake dinner. Parents, businesses and community organizations donated for this special graduation event.

There are more examples of Project Graduation that were implemented on a statewide basis this year by the Unit for Alcohol and Drug Education. The thrust of the project began on May 1 when Commissioner Reynolds sent letters to all Maine school superintendents and public and private school principals suggesting ways to prevent accidents during the graduation period. One such suggestion concerned the staging of alcohol-free parties.

In accordance with these suggestions, school officials wrote to their seniors urging responsible decision making and also requesting concerned youth and adults to organize alcohol-free parties.

In support of the effort, chairperson for the Newport (SAD 48) drug team, Linda Amsden, sent a letter to fellow team coordinators providing them with an overview of the resources available from the Unit for Alcohol and Drug Education. Requests for the Unit's films on drinking and driving multiplied and were in constant use throughout May and June of this year. Seven hundred posters designed by the Maine Highway Safety Committee were mailed to school districts requesting this resource. Twenty-five hundred key chains with the message, "Friends don't let friends drive drunk" were distributed to graduates from the Alcohol, Other Drugs and Highway Safety team sites.

On May 11, Commissioner Reynolds wrote to the general managers, program and news directors of Maine's television and radio stations urging that Project Graduation be given consideration for inclusion in their public service announcements. Statewide highway safety leaders were contacted

to determine their willingness to appear on television or radio. Letters were sent to the news editors of Maine's daily newspapers and the Maine Sunday Telegram requesting their support for the project.

The May 14, 1981 edition of the Kennebec Journal reported that the idea of alcohol-free graduation parties seems to be spreading. This statement, one of many such reports appearing in newspapers throughout the state this past spring, is typical of the excellent press coverage received by Project Graduation.

The idea of alcohol-free graduation parties seems to be spreading

Radio and television stations supplemented the efforts of the press in helping to eliminate alcohol-related highway deaths during commencement activities. Examples of this participation are:

- 1) WYNZ in Portland offered a five-part series on Project Graduation.
- 2) WABK in Gardiner presented a five-part series featuring the efforts of high school officials, community representatives and students in Hall-Dale, Augusta, Gardiner and Oxford Hills.
- 3) Maine legislator Sue Bell did a half-hour presentation on Project Graduation on WBME in Belfast.
- 4) WCBB, Channel 10 in Lewiston, focused on drinking and driving with presentations by Maine Secretary of State Rodney Quinn, Sergeant Tom Reardon of the Maine State Police and Representative Sue Bell.
- 5) WLBZ, Channel 2 in Bangor, taped a 30 second public service announcements featuring two students from Nokomis Regional High School in Newport which was given to WABI, Channel 5 in Bangor; WVII, Channel 7 in Bangor; and WSCH, Channel 6 in Portland. These spots were

aired six to eight times daily from mid-May to mid-June.

6) Les Hubley of the Bureau of Safety produced a public service announcements featuring the poster that used the theme, "Let commencement be a beginning not an end," designed by his office. This was distributed to and aired on many of Maine's TV stations.

Project Graduation involved thousands of graduating seniors in a struggle that focused on decision making concerning drinking, drug-taking and driving," says Janice Isaly who coordinated the statewide Project Graduation effort for the Unit for Alcohol and Drug Education.

"Parents and teachers of these seniors got involved and gave their time and energy in helping to provide alternatives to the "traditional" commencement parties where alcohol flows free. School officials, community and business leaders provided guidance, support and money for chemical-free parties. Newspaper, radio and television news directors provided awareness of the issues. State highway safety leaders cooperated throughout the entire project. All organizations and individuals who contributed to the success of this project are deserving of our thanks."

Unit Director Carl Mowatt predicts that more schools will be planning alcohol-free parties next year.

Madonna Fullerton, resource and evaluation specialist for the Unit, states that inquiries about Maine's Alcohol, Other Drugs and Highway Safety Program have been received from 15 other states. "Many of these are concerned with Project Graduation," she adds.

"Perhaps one of the most heartening elements of the entire project is the enthusiasm shown by students for these activities," Mowatt says. "When faced with an important decision, the majority of these young people opted for an alternative to festivities which involved drinking and drug-taking. Not only have they chosen wisely, but they have influenced many of their peers to make the same choice."