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MAMA's Message: Legal or Not, Drugs Are Drugs

By JULIE PETERSON

Drugs, Alcohol Take Greater U.S. Toll Than Illegal Drugs

Sandee Burbank has seen a few of her own family and friends suffer from a variety of drug problems, but not the kind most people would think of.

With a grandmother who was over-prescribed drugs to a friend with alcoholism, some of those closest to Burbank were suffering from drug use that was perfectly legal.

As a young mother talking with friends about how to protect their children from drugs, Burbank realized there was a problem in society in how Americans perceive drugs. For the past twenty years, Burbank's mission as director of Mothers Against Misuse and Abuse has been to educate people about all drugs whether they're legal or not.

"We've heard a lot of "just say know" for the past twenty years. It's brought more drugs and cheaper drugs," Burbank said at a presentation she gave at the Yakima Valley Regional Library Friday. "We say "just say know". Know about any chemical before you take it."

Burbank says it's not about legalizing the illegal drugs, but about taking legal ones more seriously, including alcohol, tobacco and prescription drugs. Just because they're socially acceptable, doesn't mean they're better for you, she said.

Instead, tobacco and alcohol kill more than 500,000 people in America per year themselves, compared to about 10,000 to 14,000 deaths nationwide related to illegal drug use, she said.

"A life is a life is a life," she said. "Drugs don't know morality. We do little to teach the safety about the use of all drugs."

From aspirin to caffeine to marijuana, people need to know what drugs they contain and ask themselves questions about whether they want to use them, she said.

First, she said, the same questions of illegal drugs should be asked about legal drugs: knowing what the chemical is, what it will do to the body and what the correct dosage is. Drug interactions should be taken into consideration, along with allergic reactions and the risk of dependency, she said.

Instead of a hysterical view of drugs, people need to know why illegal drugs are more risky, including the fact that they are purer than they used to be and are not regulated in terms of dosages.

Meanwhile, tobacco continues to kill more than 400,000 people a year, she said.

"The focus on illegal drugs diverts attention from the legal drugs. Tobacco kills so many but remains legal and subsidized by the government," Burbank said.

"Half of all traffic deaths are alcohol related. Why aren't people screaming about this. MAMA thinks it's because people don't know."

Burbank and representatives of the University of Oregon Drug Information Center have developed several presentations and training programs they offer for the public. Burbank has been nationally recognized for her efforts in drug education.

"We need to teach people how to have fun and be drug free." she said. "We need to get people to start thinking about drugs before they do it."