

'No one ever has more than two drinks'

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their feelings. They're angry. They're being punished in public for a crime that has heavy social consequences. And many deny they ever committed such a crime.

"I can't answer these questions about my drinking habits — I've never been drunk before," mutters an elderly woman in the back of the room.
"I never had more than two drinks," responds a man sitting near her.

Jim laughs. He doesn't laugh very often. "No one ever has more than two drinks folks," he says.
Jim has been leading these courses in Brazos County since September 1976. About 400 people have participated in the program since it began. In the past 18 months there have been only four repeat offenders, those who have gone through the class and later been convicted of another D.W.I. Probation officers claim this class has greatly reduced the number of repeat offenders. But Jim says this record doesn't really say much about the program.

"The observation is just not valid; statistically it's very weak," Jim explains. "I'd like to be able to show that the class has greatly affected the number of repeat offenders but we really don't have the right statistics to prove it." He adds that since the class has only been meeting for 18 months, many of those in the first class are just now getting off probation.

They are just now becoming likely to get into the position where they would be arrested for another D.W.I.," he says. According to the law, when you are on probation you are not to enter any place where alcoholic beverages are sold or served.

During the first class we take several tests. One is called the Psychological Screening Inventory. Among other things, it's supposed to determine our attitude toward the law. We take tests to determine our knowledge of alcohol and we're given lots of pamphlets to background us on alcohol and its effects.

Most of the people complete the tests and thumb through the pamphlets without much interest. Or maybe like me, they feign disinterest until they get home, where they can read the books and ponder the questions with no one knowing they may really be concerned.

Jim tells the class he is not a teacher; he's simply interested in what happens to each of us. He emphasizes that he is not labeling anyone an alcoholic.

"But alcohol is obviously causing some problems in your life or you wouldn't be here," he adds.
There is no preaching done in class. There are no gory pictures of guts and alcohol mixed on the highway. To be sure, they could find plenty of such pictures. National Safety Council statistics show that alcohol is a factor in one-half of highway fatalities. Or more vividly put,

six times as many Americans were killed by drunken drivers in the 10 years (1961-71) of the Vietnam War as were killed by the enemy.

We see slide shows about the effects of alcohol on the body and mind. We hear results from controlled experiments evaluating drinking and driving. We watch a film about the daily battle one man fights to control his drinking. He's continually doused with visions of the sexy Black Velvet girl, the comforting Old Granddaddy and the macho Schlitz Light cowboy. As I thumb through magazines, ride down the highway or watch television I'm suddenly aware of being bombarded by liquor commercials. If I did have a drinking problem, which I again assure myself I do not, think of the pressure I would be feeling to take one little drink.

Many alcohol myths are exploded during the classes. Contrary to popu-

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lar opinion, alcohol is not a stimulant; it actually depresses the central nervous system and dulls the senses. A can of beer, a glass of wine and most mixed drinks have about the same amount of alcohol content. And famous "remedies" for sobering up a drunk like cold showers, fresh air, black coffee and exercise have no effect on blood alcohol content. As one police officer put it, "All you have after you do all that is a clean, wide-awake drunk."

Jim explains the blood alcohol con-

tent test. This is the test given to those accused of driving while intoxicated to determine the actual percentage of alcohol in their blood. A breath test or a blood test can be used, and most opt for the breath test. Failure to submit to such a test can lead to suspension of your driver's license. In 48 states, including Texas, the level of intoxication is set at .01 percent. For the average 150-pound person this level is reached after about 2.4 ounces of alcohol have been drunk in one hour on an empty stomach. That's about five beers. But again, many in the class claim they didn't have that many drinks the night they were arrested.

"Someone must have messed with my test," a young man comments.
Eddie from Alcoholics Anonymous speaks at the last class. He says he has not had a drink since April 29, 1970. For over an hour he talks about problem drinking, his and ours. The white-haired and bearded Eddie figuratively walks over coals this night. He describes in detail the harmful effects alcohol has had on his life. From the downcast eyes and crooked smiles of those in his audience it's obvious some know only too well, what he is talking about.

Socially speaking, if you're a white, educated, middle class, young female this is not the place to be. In fact I am the only one of my kind.
Two in this class have discovered I am not on probation; that I have not been convicted of driving while intoxicated. They seem relieved. They don't have that "What's a nice girl like you..." look on their face anymore. And they even open up a little about their drinking.

One man I'll call Roger, is 21. He was stopped for speeding and then convicted of D.W.I. He paid a \$300

fine and was placed on probation for a year.

"I'll tell you, it really changes your lifestyle," he says. "I mean all I do now is sit at home and watch TV."

"I can't go to the Dixie Chicken for

Over the next four weeks there will be many times I want to jump and scream, 'But I'm not like the rest of you. I shouldn't be here.'

I soon find that everyone else in the room feels the same way.

a whole year. I mean it sort of limits you, you know?"
The other man is 31 and I'll call him Jack. He was convicted of D.W.I. after he wrecked his car in a nearby town.

"No, it won't change my habits much," he admitted. "But I will be more careful now."

Both are clean-cut, good looking men; the type you see lying around apartment pools or buying groceries on Sunday afternoon. Neither feels he belongs in this class.

"They really have the pits here, you know?" Jack says.

"I just figure I'll go and get my time in," Roger adds.

The last class is over and most of the people flow out of the room. Few stay to talk. As in the weeks before, most come and leave with as little socializing as possible in between. We've been given the facts, none of us plead ignorance to the effects of alcohol anymore. But have any of us changed?

A few days later I pass a car on a parking lot near Texas A&M University. Someone calls my name. It's Roger. He's riding around on a sunny afternoon with a Budweiser in hand. But... he's not driving. Maybe we learned something after all. Maybe we did belong in that class.



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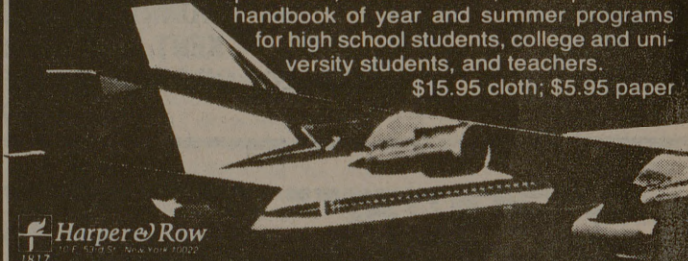
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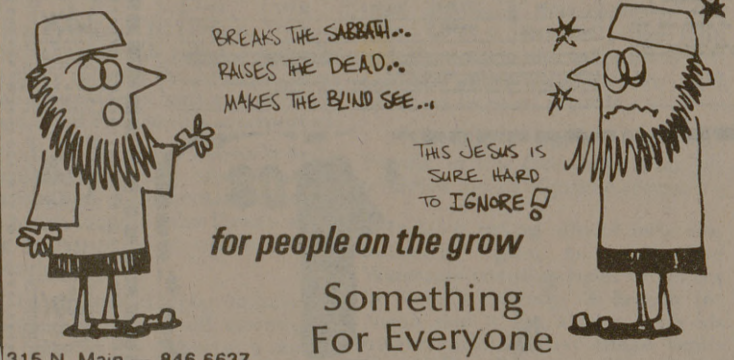
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