

Annual ‘rite of passage’ questioned

Some parents say Beach Week revelry isn’t worth the long-term consequences that can follow teens home

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Police officials call it the “June bug season” — that portion of early summer when brand new high school graduates flock to the beach to wind down, catch some rays and often, though not by choice, end up in the clink.

To be fair, not all teenagers who celebrate graduation with Beach Week end up in jail, but enough of them do to drive June’s arrest totals at Delaware’s Rehoboth Beach, a popular destination for post-graduation teens along with Dewey Beach, Del., and Ocean City, Md., higher than those of their busiest months of July and August combined, according to Rehoboth Beach Police Chief Keith W. Banks.

Banks was one of six panelists who spoke and answered questions at the program “Beach Week and Underage Drinking,” sponsored by **Arlington Public Schools’ High School PTA Family Network Program and Department of Student Services**, and held at H-B Woodlawn High School in Arlington last week.

According to Banks, who fielded most of the questions from gathered parents and students, the most common types of arrests in his jurisdiction during June are for alcohol and drug offenses, disorderly conduct and resisting arrest. At the same time that he candidly presented the statistics, however, Banks assured parents that Rehoboth Beach was safe — mostly due to the department’s extra “saturation patrols” hired specifically for the summer.

“A major part of why we have a clean, safe town is because we have officers out and they will make arrests,” Banks said. According to statistics from the Rehoboth Beach/Dewey Beach Police Department, alcohol-related arrests from the end of May to the end of June last year numbered 72 in Rehoboth, 108 in Dewey and 792 in Ocean City.

Theo Stamos, an Arlington County prosecutor and a parent, urged parents to avoid these potential run-ins with the law by working with her to ban Beach Week altogether.

“In my professional opinion, nothing good is going to come out of having unsupervised 17-, 18- or 19-year-olds who we know are going to the beach to drink,” she said. “A lot of them are going to get in trouble.”

Stamos suggested that parents either refuse consent, offer teens a different vacation or offer a more unconventional solution — a \$1,000 bribe. Her worries were backed up by conclusions from a 1999 study and subsequent follow-up research conducted in part by panelist Dr. Regina Milteer, a researcher, physician and parent, which found that 75 percent of girls out of a pool of 59 participated in daily drunkenness during Beach Week. For 46 percent, getting drunk occurred

in conjunction with sexual activity. The next most common “risky behavior” was experimenting with new drugs, including LSD, cocaine and Ecstasy, the study said.

“All of the girls said that they had a good time,” Milteer said. “But most of them said that they had feelings of guilt. That means they did things that they weren’t happy that they did.”

The burden of worrying about ruined reputations or if their parents or others in their community were to find out is “a really heavy load to be carrying,” she added.

John Mahoney, an active parent in Arlington and Alexandria, including at Bishop O’Connell High School, explained how he simply said “no” to Beach Week. Describing him and his wife as “benevolent dictators,” Mahoney said that in their household “parents make the rules, parents enforce the rules.”

As for a conversation about Beach Week, saying no “just takes 15 minutes of courage,” he said.

Regardless of the anti-Beach Week message that most of the panelists relayed, many teens will make the trek to the shore, and, if that’s the case, Banks said that it’s essential for parents to keep their eyes open and communicate with their vacationing teens.

“You can’t afford to be just a friend, you must be a parent,” he said, adding that their teens should at least have minimal supervision. “Stay in a hotel a couple of blocks away and check in on them every once in a while,” he suggested.

Counselor Maureen Simmons suggested encouraging teens to find less popular beaches to go to, citing her middle daughter’s experience renting a quiet house with her friends in the Outer Banks.

They had a “wonderful experience” getting to know their neighbors and soaking up the sun, she said.

Simmons also stressed that parents do their homework: consider different locations for their teens, determine the amount of supervision they want to have over their children and realistically think about how long the vacation should be.

In addition, she said, base your decision on what you know about your teen, including his or her level of maturity. “The more information, the better the decision,” she said.

Graduation dates for the six Catholic schools in the diocese range from May 29 to June 7, well before most of the area’s public schools’ ceremonies, which are scheduled for the third week of June.

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