

THE IDs ARE FAKE BUT THE PROBLEM ISN'T

Written by Elizabeth Trendowski

The subject of underage drinking invariably brings a personal, often-nostalgic response from older adults.

Many parents of teenagers remember their own days of drinking alcohol before they were of legal age. Some were able to get served at a local bar that did not require an ID. Others used fake IDs to buy alcohol in stores or taverns.

Underage drinking and fake IDs are usually considered a rite of passage in our society, a "victimless" crime that everyone harmlessly perpetrated in their youth.

As a result, many adults tend to look the other way when it comes to underage drinking. We know kids are drinking, but didn't we do it, too? The "kids will be kids" approach taken by some parents suggests underage drinking is simply inevitable. After all, kids will find a way to get alcohol, just like generations before them.

The reality is that times have changed. The proliferation of fake IDs has played an important but largely unnoticed role in underage drinking. Computer technology has enabled underage drinkers to get high-quality fake IDs for just \$ 20, or as much as \$ 200.00. A click of a computer mouse can produce a fake ID – including an official state seal and professional lamination – that is virtually indistinguishable from an official driver's license.

Approximately forty percent to sixty percent of college-age people have fake IDs, and everyone with a computer now has easy access to one. That is a national statistic and, in Connecticut, the CT coalition to stop underage drinking showed that 52 percent of 10th graders surveyed consumed alcohol in the previous month.

In 2001, I certified more than 2000 bartenders, servers and managers throughout Connecticut for the Servers and Managers Alcohol Responsibility Training. **SMART** Programs is an educational program that teaches those who work as servers, sellers and managers in the alcohol beverage industry how to spot fake IDs and underage drinkers. Some of the participants have been teachers, police officers and other professionals trying to get a handle on the problem. They have all expressed the same opinion telling me that the new, "high-tech" fake IDs are everywhere. I agree. I see them constantly in my classes.

SMART Programs shows servers and bartenders what forms of identification are legally acceptable for purchasing alcohol in Connecticut and some of the common characteristics of a standard fake ID. Participants also study Connecticut state police guidelines for ID verification.

SMART programs has been so successful in Connecticut that in 2001 the national nightclub and bar association adopted the training at their national conventions several years in a row. The law enforcement community has praised the program and contributed to the training content.

Restaurant and bar owners endorse alcohol education because it gives formal training and certification to employees who often have no guidelines or experience in detecting fake IDs.

Unfortunately, our education program is often at odds with parents and adults who feel that fake IDs are a part of growing up and do little or nothing to stop their kids from trying to purchase alcohol illegally. If kids are getting an ambivalent message about underage drinking at home, our job becomes more difficult.

The service industry has plenty of incentive to prevent underage drinking and scrutinize every ID. Because of new state laws, bartenders and alcohol servers face stiff criminal and civil penalties if they serve an underage drinker; never mind if the underage drinker crashes his or her automobile. However, someone caught using a fake ID to purchase alcohol usually faces little or no punishment, even though

there are laws in place under which minors can be prosecuted. Aside from losing the fake ID, there is very little risk for the underage drinker.

Connecticut as well as the other forty-nine states is responding aggressively to the problem of underage drinking. Legislation cannot do it alone. Parents and adults need to send a simple and clear message to kids that underage drinking simply cannot be permitted.

The statistics don't lie. Underage drinking affects thousands of young lives every year, from drunken driving to academic problems. We simply can't afford to look the other way.

Elizabeth Trendowski was the founder and past president of SMART Programs (Servers & Managers Alcohol Responsibility Training). She is currently an adjunct professor at the University of New Haven in the hospitality department, national speaker on liquor liability and dram shop issues and works for Robson Forensic as a liquor liability / dram shop expert. She may be reached at 800.813.6736 or ElizabethA.Trendowski@robsonforensic.com.