



## Huskies raise awareness for drug and alcohol abuse

"In the absence of positive risk-taking, students learn to take negative risks-- to push themselves only to realize how human they are." – Matt Bellace, Ph.D.

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"As Huskies, you have two responsibilities: one to look out for yourself, and another to look out for those around you."

Headmaster John Thomas opened the fifth annual Community of Concern, an evening devoted to raising awareness among the sophomore class for drug and alcohol-related issues, with this advice. His words, along with those of Upper School counselors Maggie Noojin and Richard Curtis, and of motivational speaker Matt Bellace, resonated throughout the hallways during Flint Hill's Drug and Alcohol Awareness Week.

The week began with Bellace's presentation to all grades. Bellace, a psychologist, comedian, and author of the book *A Better High*, captivated the audience with his jokes and group activities. He then shared his recipe for staying substance-free: LEAD. His acronym encourages students to Lean on others for support, Express themselves in a healthy way, Achieve natural highs every day, and ultimately reminds students: Don't be afraid to take a stand.

Bellace describes his journey as a leader in the field of substance abuse prevention as “multilayered,” as his reasons for involvement were initially very personal: he was inspired by his brother, who consistently abused illegal substances throughout his adolescence. Because of his parents’ concern that Matt would fall into the same precarious path, he was sent to a summer camp that encouraged finding highs from outlets other than drugs and alcohol. Bellace evolved as a student leader at Bucknell University, and after getting a Ph.D. in psychology, he became a motivational speaker and an advocate for brain health.

“Unlike a lot of prevention speakers who are in recovery and have their own drug-related experiences, I don’t have that background,” said Bellace. “I chose never to go down that path, so I can educate people to live that life.”

Bellace focuses his presentation on natural highs because he claims that “scare tactics don’t work.”



Matt Bellace demonstrates the idea of support among peers. Photo Credit: Grace Cleland

“It’s easier to shape behavior by supporting a positive versus punishing a negative,” he said. “Telling someone not to do something is dismissive. Offering a healthy alternative is better than telling students ‘Don’t do drugs.’”

Bellace shared possible natural highs with the group, including exercise (which he says, releases chemicals like anandamide that are comparable to ingredients in drugs like marijuana), listening to music, and risk-taking.

Said Bellace of the latter, “The teenage brain is designed to take risks. Now we are so protected by [authority] that much of that risk is removed. In the absence of

positive risk-taking, students learn to take negative risks– to push themselves only to realize how human they are.”

Bellace also focused a majority of his presentation on laughter, causing a laughter-induced “natural high” among the captive audience when he sent three students and a teacher out of the presentation and told them to return thinking of a natural high. Bellace told the rest of the audience to imagine no matter what the participants said, that they were talking about kissing.

Senior Diana Cox said, “I was dying laughing. His message was so approachable.”

When the students returned, Bellace asked them questions like, “Who taught you to do this activity?” and “How old were you when you started?” to receive answers like “my grandma” and “at the age of four” that incited uproars of laughter from the audience, thus achieving one of many natural highs.

“This is so funny you might pee a little bit,” said Bellace.

In the days following his presentation, Bellace visited members of the sophomore class in a two-day workshop about drug and alcohol awareness.

“Through research, we have found that sophomore year is the year when risky behavior starts to increase significantly. It can definitely drop, but tenth grade tends to be the peak,” said Noojin.

During the workshop, Bellace focused on the brain’s structure, function, and damage due to illegal substances, and then transitioned to natural highs, encouraging sophomores to have a list of them at the ready and to ask themselves, “What can you do today that’s going to change how you feel?”

Sophomore Nathaniel Okoth said of the week, “It was a great and necessary experience. I definitely feel like I learned a lot.”

The Community of Concern event that occurred in the middle of the week involved sophomores, their parents, the administrative and counseling staff, and a number of peer counselors.

“Really the success of this event is dependent on the dynamic of the [discussion] tables and the people actually being there,” said Noojin. “We had almost one hundred percent participation.”

After Thomas presented about responsibility and leadership, District Attorney Dan Ortiz spoke about the legal repercussions and liabilities involved with substance abuse.

“I think there’s a tendency to put these types of things under the rug and not to deal with the consequences, which can more often than not include financial liability and even jail time,” said Ortiz.

The next portion of the evening involved junior and senior peer counselors presenting various scenarios at their tables for an open discussion between the sophomore students and their parents.

Sophomore Mitch Mendler said, “It was nice to hear a perspective on these issues from other parents. I liked that.”

The purpose of the discussion and the evening as a whole was to open up a dialogue between parents and students.

“It helped parents understand how to better connect with their kids on a touchy subject,” said senior and peer counselor Reid Frazier. “Hopefully it helped jump start some conversations between the students and their parents.”

Many students felt that Community of Concern made it easier for them to connect with their parents.

“I think many parents were forced to put aside their idealistic views of teenagers, face the harsh realities of our generation, and develop pragmatic solutions to the issues facing their children,” said sophomore Arman Azad. “I loved the experience.”

Azad shared a sentiment that seemed to be a common thread with not only sophomores, but also with the entire school community.

Last week, students learned to effectively address the issues of substance abuse, whether through conversation with parents, the achievement of a natural high, or

through leadership and responsibility for oneself or one's peers. This raised awareness allowed for a successful Drug and Alcohol Awareness Week, which in turn, ultimately contributes to the success of our Flint Hill community as a whole.