

# NOT EXACTLY NEAL DOW



photo: Shoshannah White

by Alex Steed

## A talk with Erica Schmitz

ERICA SCHMITZ HEADS 21 REASONS, A PORTLAND-BASED COALITION working to curb underage drinking. The coalition includes local law enforcement agencies, public health organizations, religious and neighborhood groups, Portland school officials, parents and youth.

21 Reasons was involved in the series of sting operations — er, underage alcohol-sale “compliance checks” — the Portland Police Department conducted in bars and convenience stores around town earlier this year. As a member of the Old Port Nightlife Task Force, Schmitz, 32, pushed for policy changes that have increased fees on bars and restaurants citywide to help cover the cost of extra police coverage in the Old Port. The task force’s recommendations have also led to zoning changes that make large parts of downtown Portland off-limits to establishments offering both alcohol and live entertainment.

**The Bollard: How did you get started doing this sort of work?**

Schmitz: I actually started my career

in a youth arts program — a youth leadership and empowerment program [in North Adams, Mass.] — and I did that for six years. We had a public arts program, a writing workshop, a public forum, and a theater troupe that wrote plays around issues that were important to them. There was a youth coffeehouse that was all youth-led to promote the community of young artists that wasn’t alcohol-centric.

I poured my heart and soul into it. I miss it a lot, but what I found was that after all that work and sweat and tears, while it had remote, tangible results, we found that the numbers for alcohol and drug abuse were still off the charts. The numbers would not budge.

I do believe that those efforts are incredibly important, and I am so pleased that they have been continuing, but I decided to look more at what could be changed in the community environment. We have to look at cultural norms and expectations of what it means to be a teenager and what it means to be young. In regards to alcohol, what does

having fun mean? And I felt that we really needed to change that in order to really make a difference.

**You grew up in Costa Rica. Did you drink in high school?**

I did not drink in school. I went to a lot of parties. In Costa Rica, there was alcohol at middle school parties and high school parties provided by parents, and that’s a very accepted part of the culture. Some people would say that means it was more safely managed, but I can attest that it does not necessarily result in more safety or moderation.

**How do you mean that?**

Basically, it’s the messages that we send. We know that young people have a time of rebellion — young people need to know what expectations are. What are the rules? What’s ok? Are they being enforced? Am I going to get caught? When parents confuse that by saying, ‘We don’t want you to get wasted, but here, let me buy you this case of beer, keg, or hard alcohol, so you can have drinks at your 7th grade party,’ that sends a mixed message.

For young people, the ability to drink in moderation is actually a very difficult thing developmentally, because the brain is still developing. What happens is, at that one party, that parent might be monitoring all they can and some stuff is [still] going to get out of hand, especially around sexual assault and violence among young people, even if they take the keys, make sure nobody drives. The next time, when parents are not around, the young people are more likely to drink more and to get carried away, because they’ve already gotten that message that it’s ok.

**Did you finally go wild in college?**

I didn’t go wild in college. Colleges in the United States drink, binge drink, and drink heavily, more than any other population in the country, and it’s really because of the cultures and expectations that are set up. I think that the schools actually promote it, because they think that it promotes bonding in the school and loyalty to the school, so then they’ll actually give more money later on.

For me, the college scene was a complete culture shock, a total culture shock — what we do in the United States, where upperclassmen are expected to provide alcohol for underclassmen.

Young people and young adults are much more susceptible to depression when alcohol is involved, as well as [to] dependence. Young people who start to drink before the age of 15 are four times as likely to form alcohol dependence, and young people who start to drink before the age of 17 are twice as likely compared to those who wait until they are 21. We just know a lot more now, but our cultural expectations have not yet changed.

**The legal drinking age is 18 or younger in almost 99 percent of the world. Is every other country wrong?**

Yes. I think that we have documentation and survey data that shows that alcohol problems, youth and binge-drinking rates, are actually higher in these other countries than in the U.S. Those numbers then translate to higher adult alcoholism and disease rates that are associated with alcohol abuse.

There’s a lot of myths out there about Latin America or Europe, about how drinking is more culturally accepted and it’s normal, so it’s not a big deal and kids don’t overdo it or go as crazy over it, and that’s just not true. We know from surveys of European youth that they actually drink more heavily and get drunk more often than do American youth. I haven’t seen surveys from Latin America, but from my own experience, it’s probably pretty similar.

**Are underage people drinking in local bars?**

Yes. I have heard from a lot of young people, young women especially, who are 18 and 19 years old, that they have no problem at all getting into bars in the Old Port.

**Which bars?**

I couldn’t tell you names. Names haven’t been disclosed to me and that wouldn’t be my role to say. But that’s one of the reasons that the work we do and the work that the Portland Police Department is doing is so important.

**You’ve worked with the police department on sting operations ...**

Some people call them sting operations, but that sounds like you’re out to get people. The proper term is ‘compliance check.’ It’s basically monitoring to make sure that businesses are in compliance with the law.

We know from national research that compliance checks are the key to reducing sales to minors. Seller training is really important and we work on that