

Name: Emily Deaver

Title: Miss Kansas

Crossroads of Abuse and Addiction: The Road Less Traveled

A generation ago former First Lady, Nancy Reagan, exclaimed, “Just say no!” Federal agencies created and funded Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) programs and placed them in 75% of our public schools. Unfortunately, popular slogans, images and “feelings” of effectiveness in combating the war on drugs contrasts starkly with the harsh reality of increased drug and alcohol abuse by adolescents and college students today.

Alcohol is the drug of choice among adolescents. 75% of high school students have tried alcohol. More than 67% of young people who start drinking before the age of 15 will try an illicit drug. Children who drink are 7.5 times more likely to use an illicit drug; 22 times more likely to use marijuana; and 50 times more likely to use cocaine than children who never drank. College students have higher rates of drug or alcohol addiction than the general public, yet school administrators do not do enough to curtail their use on campuses. The social norm views alcohol and marijuana as part of a rite of passage which, not surprisingly, continues to interfere with a perception of their harm.

Donald Howard, President Emeritus of Bates College in Maine, says, “Drinking and drug abuse are symptoms of students’ disengagement from academic and civil life on campus.” Students drink and use drugs to relax, release stress, forget about problems or simply to “fit in.” Binge drinking and abuse of prescription drugs are dramatically on the rise. A survey by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University found that two thirds of college administrators claimed the responsibility for stopping drug and alcohol abuse rests solely with the students. Failed programs and indifference have immunized society against this increasingly urgent problem across the nation.

Effective prevention and cessation programs must reduce risk factors (those hazards that increase a persons’ vulnerability to alcohol and drug use/abuse) while increasing protective factors in all areas that touch the lives of people at risk. Problem behaviors associated with risk factors tend to cluster. Since individuals engage in drug and alcohol for a variety of reasons, no single approach is likely to be effective; therefore, programs must focus on a comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach that centers on family dynamics, school performance, community rules and expectations, and the development of individual social skills and coping strategies.

Through my experience, I have known people who stood at the crossroads of abuse and addiction. Some chose the easy path and gave power over their lives to drugs and alcohol. Others chose the more difficult route toward sobriety and drug-free living. Knowing years lost cannot be reclaimed, as Miss America I will work with my community of influence to develop age appropriate and honest approaches to creating awareness about the urgency of the problem, and work to change the attitudes and behaviors that put young people at risk for drug and alcohol abuse and addiction.

Expanding on my work with the National Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency, the National Crime Prevention Council, the Center for Mental Health Services, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Kansas Juvenile Justice Authority, the Supreme Court of Kansas’ Office of Judicial Administration, The Counseling Center for Alcohol and Drug Services (Pratt), the Juvenile Detention Centers in the counties of Douglass and Wyandotte, and the Kansas Alcohol and Drug Abuse Services in Topeka, my year of service as Miss America will focus on three areas:

EDUCATION: I will expand my web site to serve as a national resource for young people struggling with abuse and addiction and for parents and educators looking for counseling sources, information, tips from professionals, programs of prevention, and support groups. It will include a section for users to tell their stories of tragedy and triumph, free of judgment, in hopes of inspiring others to choose to live their lives rather than give them over to their drug of choice. “Emily’s Challenge” will be expanded to invite young people to register and download a pledge form declaring their intent to avoid drugs and alcohol.

ADVOCACY: I will work with school systems and juvenile justice programs across the country to seek realistic solutions to young people whose education has been interrupted due to drugs and/or alcohol and to develop empowerment programs to assist those in the justice system to make better choices for themselves.

OUTREACH: As Miss America, I will hold town hall meetings to openly discuss the reality of the problem, bringing together users, parents, educators, faith-based groups, counselors, and juvenile justice authorities in order to discuss the risk factors that exist in the area-known and unknown- and to explore and expose the protective factors that can serve as a safety net for those in need. The results of these meetings will form the factual basis for a report I will deliver to the Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools.