

INVESTIGATIVE: Underage Drinking At ABAC

Tweets flooded into @StallionABAC on Wednesday, Feb. 12, as concerns rose about an article detailing the arrest of 28 students for possessing alcohol at a party in Turner County.

Hannah Howard (@Hannahynn_1) tweeted, “It’s none of y’all’s business to ‘look into’ the events that happened place NO HARM on any students on campus.”

As word spread that the Stallion was working on a police report about the students being arrested, students and school administrators asked that the names of the people involved be withheld. Stallion editors met and decided not to publish the names of the students because of the newspaper’s responsibility to be fair.

The names were not the issue. However, Tuesday morning, Feb. 11, The Stallion’s newest issue hit the stands and quickly disappeared – apparently stolen by worried students. Some papers were later found in trash cans around campus, but many never resurfaced.

Police reported that three young women came to the ABAC police station and attempted take all the papers there before being questioned by the sergeant. Apparently, people were distraught over the mere reporting of minor in possession arrests.

@LaurenDianeP tweeted, “This paper is trash, & like @FaithScriven has said, report what's true and COMPLETE and maybe it wouldn't be treated as trash.”

John Russell Fowler (@Mr_Rockafowler) tweeted The Stallion a picture of

his toilet with a stack of the newspapers on top and added the caption, “Don’t have to buy toilet paper for a few days, thanks @StallionABAC.”

The feud on Twitter got so exciting for Will Sullivan (@Will11Sullivan) that he tweeted, “Can’t even put my phone down for a test.”

Dixon Jack Fletcher, who reported on the Turner County arrests, called everyone who was arrested, using the phone numbers listed in the police report. Fletcher asked if they would discuss any problems with the police report in the paper or the official police report from the Turner County Sheriff Department.

Some of the students said they were willing to come to the Stallion office and tell what they saw the night of the incident, but none of the students appeared for the scheduled interviews.

Having 28 underage students arrested for possessing alcohol is enough to stir up a Twitter-storm. However, few students are willing to talk about the problem publicly, preferring instead to hide the issue like a stack of stolen newspapers and hope nobody notices.

Maggie Martin, Director of Student Development at ABAC, said that most students may avoid discussing alcohol openly simply because it’s illegal for them to have any experience with it. “Drinking is a problem, but it’s just that the majority of the students on campus are under 21,” she said.

Yet the consequences are real at ABAC, even when the drinking takes place off campus. On Feb. 18, Officer Jared Godwin of the Tifton Police Department stopped a pickup on Davis Road near ABAC. According to the police report, Godwin smelled alcohol, so he tested the occupants. The driver hadn’t been drinking. However, the two 18-year-old women in the

pickup had been drinking, and they were both arrested on charges of illegal possession of alcohol.

“There is a real problem with off-campus drinking. Students think that they are OK because they didn’t drink on campus but then they come back and get arrested,” said Martin.

“Some students feel like they were set up by the police, like they were waiting on them,” Martin mentioned, then added, “I think that some cases are a little extreme...but the law is the law.”

Since Aug. 1, 2013, the Tift County Sheriff’s Office arrested nine people for minor in possession of alcohol, the City of Tifton Police Department has arrested 26 for minor in possession, and the ABAC Police Department arrested 24 people for minor in possession. The incident in Turner County involved 30 people being arrested, of which 28 were students.

ABAC is a dry campus, meaning that alcohol is strictly banned from campus for people of legal drinking age. “Most campuses are dry, but the colleges and universities that are wet campuses allow of-age students to drink in their rooms. But they cannot provide alcohol to minors and it brings a stiff penalty if caught,” said Bernice Hughes, Dean of Students.

"We are a four-year college but most of our classes are for a two-year associate’s degrees and so, in my opinion, we should stay a dry campus until we grow," said Hughes. “I would say that 75 percent of students on campus are under 21. So when we have more four-year programs and students that are over the age of 21, becoming a wet campus is something that can be revisited.”

ABAC police say most students charged with possession of alcohol have

done something unusual to attract attention.

“The ones that get caught...they are either being real loud and boisterous, or they’re bothering someone else and we get called to come and ask somebody to turn down the music, or they’re playing their video games. They’re beating on the walls, stomping on the floors, just really being loud or driving around campus and committing moving violation,” said Lieutenant Chris Stephens of the ABAC Police Department.

Stephens said when students are arrested by the ABAC Police Department, “They will be transported down to the county jail. They will be read the implied consent law. They will generally have the state approved Breathalyzer test given to them, then they will be written a citation and turned over to the county jail.”

He added, “You, as an officer, would always hope that and wish that the offender would see that as an opportunity to learn and thereby having to deal with a situation once they’ve gotten into it chose to make whatever necessary adjustments to their behavior and in their own life to not have to travel back down type of path again, but use it as a learning experience.”

Hughes explained what the school requires of students who are arrested, “If you live in the residence halls and get caught with alcohol you have to take an online class for your first offense. For the second offense, we may give them mandatory counseling and community service hours.” She said her job is not to punish students. “What we try to do is educate. We are not the criminal system.”

ABAC’s culture has a dark side that glorifies binge drinking. Blackout Stallions (@blackoutabac) is a Twitter account devoted to sharing “your

great drunk blackout moments at ABAC,” according to the bio on the account. Students publicly or privately send pictures to the account through Twitter, Snapchat, and email. The pictures are then publicly shared through the account’s Twitter feed.

Hughes asks students to be careful and responsible. "If you’re drinking on an empty stomach, if you’re a certain size, know about how many drinks you can tolerate. Students also need to know that if they take prescription drugs, alcohol could react negatively with their medication,” said Hughes.

“People drinking should have a person with them that looks out for them, don’t let them wander around in a big crowd of people,” Hughes warned. She cautioned those who drink. “It’s not a game to get sloppy drunk.”

“It is something that has caught the national attention, and it has gained momentum as the recent years have gone by. That tends to happen when you have college kids binge drinking and end up in a hospital. Some are lucky enough to survive it. Others, they don’t make it,” Stephens remarked.

He is glad he has never had to tell parents that their child will not be coming back home from college because of an accident involving drug or alcohol abuse while he’s worked at ABAC, but he remembers those moments from previous jobs.

The Dean of Students office is working on a program of peer education to give students additional options for dealing with issues they find themselves in, including those involving alcohol.

“A lot of times a student will talk to his peers instead of administration so we are trying to recruit people to be peer educators. We are not asking the peer educators to be tattle tales; we are just trying to train people to know

what to do if things happen,” Hughes said.

“A lot of students, when their friends are drunk and may need medical attention, they are too afraid of getting in trouble or going to jail,” she added. This program, she hopes, will teach students what to do if such a problem arises.

Martin said both students and the establishments that students frequent are to blame. “It’s the establishment’s responsibility not to serve alcohol underage or to over serve people, but it’s also the responsibility of individuals to be smart about drinking” said Martin.

Martin said if students do get arrested or are struggling with any sort of addiction, there are many ways that the Student Development Center can help. “We can get them an assessment and get them into treatment if they need it,” she said. “We can help students find ways to deal with peer pressure and find healthy interests. It’s about making educated choices.”

The Student Development Center helps students with career placement, career development and testing in addition to their main service, personal counseling and art therapy.

Martin stressed that alcohol has a very negative impact on young drinkers because human brains continue to develop in people are age 25. “Heavy drinking stunts emotional growth. If someone starts drinking heavily at age 15 and they stop at 25, they will still be having the emotional reactions of a 15-year-old,” she explained.

Dean Hughes said, “My thing is to know your limits. I am not the moral police. It is illegal if you’re under 21 to take a drink but if someone should decide to take that drink I want to make sure that they have been taught

responsible behavior.”

She says being responsible means caring about the problems of others, and peer educators can help make that possible. “For example, if someone’s roommate comes in drunk all the time, they may not want to get their roommate in trouble so they could call the peer educator to come talk to them and find a solution instead of reporting the student,” Hughes said.

Anyone interested in becoming a peer educator can contact the Dean of Students Office at 229-391-5129.

Lt. Stephens shared some advice he received when he was a kid:

“Something that my grandfather told me a long time ago, ‘The character of a man is determined by how well we learn by our mistakes and don’t make the same mistakes over and over again.’”

Molly Hatchcock (@MollyHatchcock) tweeted: “@StallionABAC if I’m not mistaken, the arrests didn’t happen on campus. Or even in the county so that situation should have been left alone.”

Lt. Stephens’ grandfather might answer that trying to hide mistakes because they happen elsewhere is also one way to make sure no one learns from those mistakes.