

**Lecture Topic:** "From Binge to Blackout: The Mother and Son Team of Chris and Toren Volkmann"  
**Speakers:** Ms. Chris Volkmann  
Mr. Toren Volkmann  
**Sponsor:** Family Awareness Network of New Trier Township (FAN)  
**Date:** April 18, 2007  
**Submitted By:** Lonnie Stonitsch/NSCDS FAN School Liaison

**SUMMARY:**

Chris and Toren Volkmann are mother and son, and co-authors of the 2006 book "From Binge to Blackout," a narrative that traces Toren's alcoholism from early teen experimentation through addiction to recovery. The book alternates between the viewpoints of mother and son. Their lecture reprised this format, with Chris and Toren taking turns offering personal stories and research about teens and alcohol abuse.

The Volkmanns wish to lift the veil of secrecy surrounding the "perfect family" by revealing the layers of fear and denial the enabled Toren's alcoholism. Their presentation articulates their views on how "alcohol culture" permeates families and society. The Volkmanns also presented information about alcohol's affect on the developing adolescent brain.

**TOREN:**

*(Note: All descriptions are direct quotes from Toren's portion of the lecture, not the observations of the writer.)*

Toren is 27 years old, has a BA in psychology from the University of San Diego, and is a former Peace Corps volunteer in Paraguay. He is 3-1/2 years sober. He hopes to change attitudes about binge drinking, to highlight the divide between perceptions and reality vis-à-vis alcohol, and to provide inspiration for those struggling with alcoholism in their lives.

Toren grew up with supportive parents, perhaps over-involved. His father is a doctor, and was very involved with Toren's many sports activities. His mother was an active member of the PTA.

Toren learned about drugs/alcohol in health class in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, yet made a lot of bad decisions. He started drinking at age 15, and was busted by the police at a party. His penalties for this included: 1) he could only stay out until 11 one night per week; 2) he was allowed only one TV program per night; 3) had to keep his grades up; 4) had to get a summer job; 5) was allowed to assist coaching the soccer team; 6) had to mow the lawn; 7) had to pay for any car insurance increase and court costs; and 8) had to announce his whereabouts when leaving the house.

Toren never thought of himself as an alcoholic, even after he got kicked off of all his sports teams in high school. He didn't seek out intervention, or counseling. He never flinched, and never cared about the repercussions. The risks associated with alcohol are abstract concepts to adolescents.

Toren was arrested a few times for alcohol-related issues, was dropped from his sports teams, but continued to get good grades. After his arrests, his behavior would improve, but once he arrived at college, he was in trouble within 3 weeks. He was required to go to alcohol-offender meetings, but only attended a few. He thought it was his right to drink. He was on the Dean's List, but was also evicted from the dorms. His only goals were to meet new people, party and get good grades.

Toren's Resident Head required him to attend 10 Alcoholics Anonymous meetings over the summer after his first year of college. He went to one meeting, told his story, but didn't believe that he had a problem with alcohol. Attended one more meeting, then stopped. He now wishes he had attended the other 8.

Toren's drinking style changed in college. He had less trouble with the police and parents, but his issues worsened. He surrounded himself with other drinkers, and lost sight of "normal" behavior.

The physical symptoms of Toren's alcoholism appeared. He would stay in bed, not able to sleep, for hours at a time. Hand tremors, sweats, fever, anxiety, depression, fear, social unease.

His knew from his studies in psychology that his defense mechanisms prevented him from acknowledging the truth of his situation. 9 months after leaving college, he joined the Peace Corps.

In Paraguay, he was with a group of 30 volunteers, all in their early- to mid-twenties. Toren reinvented himself. He thought that he could drink 2 or 3 drinks at a time, but by the 4<sup>th</sup> month, he crumbled. He had a fear of being alone that was very painful. Toren came to the painful realization that he was not calling the shots when drinking. The combination of social situations with alcohol resulted in a loss of control.

Toren was sent back to Washington, D.C., and entered a 30-day inpatient treatment program. He then went to a halfway house for 6 months, worked 40 hours a week, and started writing.

**CHRIS:**

*(Note: All descriptions are direct quotes from Chris's portion of the lecture, not the observations of the writer.)*

Chris is married, mother to three sons, a former classroom teacher and plays viola with a symphony orchestra. In most ways she thought she was struggling with Toren's

alcoholism alone, that it had to be kept secret. She was an example of how parents don't face the facts in front of them, causing them to go underground.

Chris believes it's never too soon to start talking about alcohol. The many stigmas surrounding alcohol, particularly the "bad parent" label, leads to silence among families. Chris had great difficulty recognizing the seriousness of Toren's problems, but feared admitting it. Teens hide things, but parents need to take a firm stand, have a plan and intervene earlier.

Chris feels that parents need to ask their college-bound children a few questions: 1) How will you decide to drink or not at parties?; 2) What will you do if your friends want to drink?; 3) What will you do if a friend passes out from drinking?

Chris was in big denial about Toren needing to attend AA meetings. She wishes she had been more open and honest with the people in her life about Toren's drinking.

Things Chris would change if she could: 1) Obtain counseling for Toren and the family sooner – the average parent waits 4 years to seek counseling; 2) Visit college campuses with Toren; 3) Reduce the amount of unstructured time Toren had in high school; 4) Stop protecting Toren from the legal issues he faced.

Chris maintains that allowing teens to drink at home is unacceptable. It's not a moral issue but a health issue. In assessing colleges, find out if the school has a policy of notifying parents of drug/alcohol offenses. Determine what support structures exist once a student has been identified as having a drug/alcohol problem.

### **ALCOHOL CULTURE:**

*(Note: The items below were presented by the Volkmanns, but have not been checked for accuracy.)*

1. By 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 1 in 5 children are drinking, but only 5% of parents think that their child is drinking. By 12<sup>th</sup> grade, 66% are drinking, and 41% of parents know about it.
2. 2/3 of all adults drink. 1/3 of high school seniors are heavy drinkers.
3. 20% of adolescents who sample alcohol become dependent. If alcohol is sampled between the ages of 14 and 16, the chance of addiction increases 5X.
4. There are more than 10 million drinkers between the ages of 12 and 20. Of these, 20% are binge drinkers, and 6% are heavy drinkers.
5. 1 in 5 adults are binge drinkers. Male binge drinking is defined as 5 or more drinks in a single drinking session. Female binge drinking is defined as 4 or more drinks in a single drinking session. Frequent bingeing is defined as 3 or more binge drinking sessions in a 2 week time period.
6. The adolescent brain is more vulnerable to the neurotoxic effects of alcohol than an adult brain. For an adolescent, bingeing even a single time can cause irreparable harm.

7. For an adolescent (males, ages 11 to 23; females, ages 11-20), it takes anywhere from 5 to 15 months to become addicted to alcohol, affecting their abstract reasoning skills, problem-solving skills, attention and concentration, and their perception of emotion.
8. 75% of adolescents who need treatment don't get it.
9. The greatest danger of long-term complications related to alcohol happens at the beginning of each academic year, primarily among male college freshmen.
10. 7000 kids under the age of 16 take up drinking every day. Kids learn to binge in high school. Parents think it's benign, and there's strong peer pressure to participate. Once at college, many bars heavily promote drinking. At more rural colleges, there are fewer entertainment options. Peer pressure can intensify.
11. An individual with a particular variant of the 5-HTT gene (a serotonin-transporter gene) may drink more alcohol per occasion, drink more often to get drunk, and are more likely to binge than those without the gene variant.
12. Alcohol is big business. Alcohol is not listed as a drug in the War on Drugs, even though alcohol kills 6X more youth than all other drugs combined. The federal government spends 25X more on illegal drug awareness than on alcohol awareness.
13. Easy access to alcohol is a principal factor in heavy drinking.
14. Red flags about alcohol: legal or financial difficulties; problems at school and in relationships; drinking to get drunk.