

Drinking Deaths Draw Attention to Old Campus Problem

By MINDY SINK

BOULDER, Colo., Nov. 5 — Lynn G. Bailey, 18, a freshman at the University of Colorado here, spent his last night chugging whiskey and wine as part of an initiation ceremony with his fraternity brothers. Left by his friends to sleep it off, he died from alcohol poisoning.

Less than two weeks earlier and an hour's drive away, Samantha Spady, 19, a sophomore at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, died of alcohol poisoning after an evening out with friends in which she drank the equivalent of 30 to 40 beers and shots.

In the aftermath of these deaths this fall, university officials and community leaders are joining forces, rather than pointing fingers, and are looking at how they can take responsibility together to prevent alcohol abuse.

"It was the straw that broke the camel's back," said a Boulder city councilman and the deputy mayor, Tom Eldridge, of the back-to-back deaths and years of tension built up in neighborhoods adjacent to the campus.

The University of Colorado is still dealing with damage to its image after accusations of rape involving football players and recruits in recent years. Many of those accusations also involved drinking heavily.



Carmel Zucker for The New York Times

or not, at private parties and bars. Some critics questioned what kind of message it sent to students that the athletic director, Dick Tharp, was also an owner of Liquor Mart, the town's largest liquor store. Boulder and Fort Collins have a history of alcohol-fueled riots and out-of-control parties often combined with underage drinking despite years of the universities' offering awareness programs, participating in studies to reduce campus drinking, selective banning of alcohol on campus and more punitive measures, like suspension and calling parents.

"The community and the campus both have to admit they have a problem," said Dr. Richard Yoast, director of an American Medical Association program to reduce high-risk drinking. "I think it's very important that they work together."

To that end, business owners, neighborhood associations, student groups and college and community leaders are meeting.

One month after Mr. Bailey's death, the Boulder City Council unanimously passed a resolution to review alcohol licensing policies, zoning laws and code enforcement as ways to decrease binge drinking by college students. In Fort Collins, beer sales have been banned at football games, alcohol consumption is banned in fraternities and sororities, and a task force that includes the state's lieutenant governor and the local police chief is studying ways to reduce alcohol abuse.

"Certainly when we have an event like this, and when we heard of the death in Fort Collins first, it's a lightning rod and focuses our attention," said the Boulder mayor, Mark Ruzzin. "Between the university and the city we have evolved our thinking that students are community mem-

The Chi Psi fraternity house at the University of Colorado, where Lynn G. Bailey, 18, a freshman, died on Sept. 16. According to a 2002 study, alcohol abuse kills about 1,400 college students ages 18 to 24 annually.



Paben Photography

Samantha Spady, 19, died Sept. 5 of alcohol poisoning.

bers, so we've pretty much dissolved that jurisdictional line between university and the city."

Both Ms. Spady and Mr. Bailey died in fraternity houses after drinking at private parties or in the mountains all evening. (The local chapters of those fraternities have been closed indefinitely.) Ms. Spady had a blood alcohol level of .436 percent, over five times the .08 percent that is the national standard for drunken driving, and Mr. Bailey's was .328. The minimum drinking age is 21; both were teenagers.

Experts say that these deaths represent just a fraction of the problem

Two cases of fatal alcohol poisoning in Colorado renew a search for answers.

of binge drinking on college campuses: there have been three more alcohol poisoning deaths this year, involving college students in Arkansas, Virginia and Oklahoma, and a death at Colorado College in Colorado Springs in which a student fell from a window after hours of drinking. According to a 2002 study by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, approximately 1,400 college students 18 to 24 die annually as a result of alcohol abuse. While most of those deaths are from traffic accidents, about 300 are from unintentional injuries that include alcohol poisoning.

"It's only through luck that we haven't had this become a weekly occurrence," said Bob Maust, chairman of the Standing Committee on Substance Abuse at the University of Colorado. "I've been doing this for 35 years, and I see the results every week of near misses."

Mr. Maust said that what was less studied or publicized were the many college students who did survive near-lethal intoxication after being rushed to emergency rooms by friends.

A Boulder city councilman, Will Toor, said that while he supported making changes to help prevent alcohol abuse, he urged caution. "I am

somewhat concerned that past attempts — from the federal level to the local level — have made things worse," Mr. Toor said, adding that campus restrictions on drinking had pushed students away from adult-controlled environments and even into drinking harder alcohol.

One of the issues being looked at here is the high density of liquor stores and bars around college campuses and the frequent discounts the businesses offer.

"The cheaper the drinks, the more problems," Dr. Yoast said, referring to offers of two for one or free drinks for women at bars near campuses.

But some local business owners say they are being blamed unfairly.

"I don't think the liquor stores are the problem," said Russell Harverson, general manager of Rose Hill Wine and Spirits, a store one block from campus here. "These kids are away from home for the first time and not taught to drink responsibly. We do our darnedest not to sell to minors."

Mr. Harverson spoke as he was putting up signs for his shot glasses and beer mugs with the college logo on them.

Brian Lane, 22, who stopped at the store on a Friday morning to buy an 18-pack of beer for himself and friends that night, said that his own drinking had decreased from when he was a freshman and that more restrictions would not solve the problem.

"I think it's more individual responsibility," Mr. Lane said. "There is plenty of stuff to do in Boulder besides drinking."