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Skyline grads view their alcohol-awareness film, 25 years later

By Pam Mellskog Longmont Times-Call
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Beverly Title wrote the script for a documentary made by a group from Alternatives for Youth in the 1980s following the alcohol-related death of one of their friends. She speaks to the group Saturday, Dec. 10, 2011, at Heritage Middle School, where the old friends gathered for a reunion. (Joshua Buck/Times-Call) (Joshua Buck/Times-Call)

LONGMONT -- The sniffles started during the film's opening scene, when the middle-aged audience viewed themselves in a film they made to dramatize the alcohol-related death of their Skyline High School classmate.

Back then, in January 1984, the group had been drinking and smoking at a neighborhood party when buddy Richie Dorman, 15, stumbled out the door to walk home. A boy found him on a bike path the next morning, his moustache and beard frozen to his pale face. The coroner pronounced Dorman dead of alcohol poisoning, with a blood alcohol level four times the legal limit for driving in Colorado.

Email Alternatives for Youth executive director Deb Roberts at debroberts@alternativesforyouth.org.

Instead of letting the students work out their grief alone, Joseph Sundram -- then-director of Alternatives for Youth, a nonprofit outreach to at-risk kids -- recognized a teachable moment and contacted Beverly Title about dramatizing the story to send a message that alcohol consumption can be fatal.

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Title then taught a program for at-risk middle school students across the street from Skyline at Northeast Junior High School, which is now Heritage Middle School, and earned a master's degree in children's theater and creative dramatics.

She agreed.

"Kids hear the message better from other kids than they do from adults," she said.

She wrote the screenplay for the film, "The Last Party," and then selected the cast from Dorman's friends.

Then, Title joined them on Saturday night to view it again for the first time in at least 25 years.

The film opens with a group of kids lounging around a coffee table strewn with bottles of booze and ashtrays.

The girls' feathered hairdos and blue eye shadow, along with the black leather pants and cut-off shirts the guys wear, date the film.

But the scene plays out like parties held then and now -- with partygoers becoming progressively more impaired before disbanding.

By the end, the same group of kids holds carnations and stands around their friend's tombstone wondering aloud why they did not take drinking risks more seriously.

Alternatives for Youth board president Jack Hay said the message in the 1980s film project remains relevant for kids and their parents.

"Parents think it's the lesser of two evils compared to drugs," he said. "But it is still deadly."

One event organizer, who preferred anonymity, said that she looked up Sundram and got the film to share with her classmates because her kids are now the age she was when Dorman died.

"Once I finally found the movie, I needed to be with the people I was with then," she continued. "This is healing. But it will take a lifetime for me to heal from that."

Pam Mellskog can be reached at 303-684-5224 or by email at pmellskog@times-call.com.

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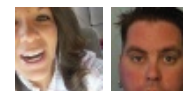
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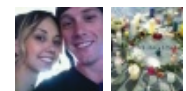
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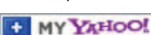
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