

I am 18 years old and currently undertaking a Policy Traineeship at the Commission for Children and Young People. I was fortunate enough to go out and speak to young people about alcohol-related issues and experiences prior to the forum that was held yesterday and this week's Summit.

### **Binge drinking and Australian culture are synonymous**

I might start off by re-emphasising that Alcohol consumption and binge drinking is ingrained in Australian culture. From a very young age, children are bombarded with images of friends and family members drinking at barbeques, during and after sporting events and at traditional events such as during schoolies week. Young people associate drinking with maturity. Most young people look forward to making the transition into adulthood and young people perceive alcohol consumption as a right of passage and an essential part of growing up.

### **Alcohol is legal so people don't think of it as a serious drug**

Young people and the community also accept alcohol more so than other drugs because it is legal – adults readily buy kids drinks. Total strangers will go into the bottle shop for you and buy you a slab, especially if you tell them that there is a stubby in it for them! Yes, some young people told us they do use fake i.d's, others said it was whole lot easier to attempt purchasing it themselves or coaxing someone into doing them a favour.

Young people I met who have both drug and alcohol addiction say that if you asked an adult stranger to buy you a tab of heroin, they would be shocked. Yet they won't think twice about buying you alcohol. One young person said he would hunt reptiles down in the bush and sell them in order to raise the funds to buy alcohol.

### **Young alcoholics say that makes it hard to give up drinking**

In trying to acquire an understanding of young people's views on ways to reduce alcohol-related harm, my colleagues and I went and talked to young people in residential rehabilitation centres about their experiences and suggestions. They said that because alcohol was legal, it is really hard to give it up – it is so in your face. Every corner has a pub on it, there are ads for alcohol everywhere, and bottle shop staff serve kids all over NSW (in some rural areas, they serve kids through the window – everyone thinks that makes it OK!!).

The other factor with young people and addiction is that it very hard for a 16 year old to accept that he or she has a drinking problem, and it is impossible to hear the words, 'you can never drink again' – you can't tell a 16 year old that! Quite a number of young people said that they never thought young people were capable of developing alcohol dependence. Some of the young people at yesterday's forum were brave enough to tell of their near-death experiences as a result of alcohol dependence and how they got help. They said getting help was

really hard, and that they needed the time to develop relationships with the services and people who were there to help. They wanted people who they could relate to, who really knew about their issues, and people they could access.

I've heard adults say that young people can't be alcohol dependant. It is actually quite unusual for young people to steer clear of dependence. There are enormous pressures placed on young people. Alcoholic beverages and products are not the only things being targeted at young people. All the glamour, modelling, and perfect figures depicted in today's society reduce confidence, self-esteem, and raise self-consciousness – easily fixed by a few drinks.

So long as young people consume alcohol, they will remain prone to alcohol dependence. That doesn't mean we tell young people to stop drinking but rather encourage and listen to them as they tell us how harm can be reduced.