A Shared Vision

Aware Awake Alive and Cal Poly Work Together to Stop Alcohol Poisoning

BY MATT LAZIER

In January, Cal Poly and Aware Awake Alive will begin training representatives from the other 22 California State University campuses on how to implement programming from the nonprofit organization aimed at saving lives from alcohol poisoning.

It is just the latest step in the nearly five-year partnership between Cal Poly and Aware Awake Alive — founded by Scott, Julia and Hayden Starkey — a relationship born in tragedy but now flourishing in the shared vision of promoting the health, safety and well-being of students everywhere.

The story began in 2008, when 18-year-old Carson Starkey came to Cal Poly from his hometown of Austin, Texas, to begin his freshman year. Less than three months later, Carson died from alcohol poisoning in a fraternity hazing incident.

The tragedy rocked both the Starkey family and Cal Poly.

The university responded by revising the policies governing its Greek Life organizations and, more broadly, increasing its efforts to raise awareness of the dangers of alcohol abuse and more aggressively promote to students the benefits of a healthy lifestyle.

Carson’s parents, Scott and Julia, and his older brother, Hayden, focused their grief into a vision of a world in which no other young lives are cut short by alcohol poisoning. The family launched the nonprofit Aware Awake Alive to ensure that prevention of needless alcohol-related tragedy becomes Carson’s lasting legacy.

With similar aims, it was natural for the nonprofit and the university to work together.

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and devoted partner first in the examination of the circumstances of Carson’s death and then in the formation and adoption of what would become Aware Awake Alive,” Julia Starkey said. “As this movement grows across CSU campuses and nationally, Cal Poly continues to be our testing ground for how meaningful change starts and grows.”

Aware Awake Alive works to raise awareness among college- and high-school-age students of the dangers, signs and symptoms of alcohol poisoning. The organization provides tools to help students, parents, and those influential to young people to know how to react when someone has consumed a dangerous amount of alcohol.

Cal Poly officially adopted Aware Awake Alive programming in the fall of 2011 and began presenting it to new students and parents.

“We receive our freshmen students at an important and vulnerable time in their lives, when they are experiencing for the first time the freedom of living on their own,” said Cal Poly President Jeffrey D. Armstrong, who serves on Aware Awake Alive’s Board of Directors. “Aware Awake Alive provides the tools for this important part of our new students’ education,” Armstrong said.

Earlier this year, under the guidance of Vice President for Student Affairs Keith Humphrey, Cal Poly overhauled the policies and procedures governing oversight of its Greek Life organizations. The collaborative effort involved input from Cal Poly administration and students in the university’s Greek Life program. Cal Poly consulted with the Starkeys and Aware Awake Alive through the process.

The result is a list of numerous new policies being implemented in phases over three years, beginning this fall. Among them:

• Registration of off-campus parties and adoption of new alcohol-management policies;
• New members will be required to participate in health and wellness programs;
• A student-run review process, through which chapters will be assessed on positive qualities and informed of areas of needed improvement; and
• Commitment to establishing more chapters at Cal Poly, giving students the option to choose smaller chapters.

Aware Awake Alive leaders are playing a significant part in the new educational enhancements to Cal Poly’s Greek Life system.

“What the Starkeys are doing is inspirational, and it’s a privilege to work with them to help our students stay healthy. We are also proud to play our part in spreading the Aware Awake Alive message to the rest of the CSU.” Humphrey said.

Scott and Julia Starkey delivered a moving statement to the CSU Board of Trustees in July, after which CSU Chancellor Timothy P. White committed to rolling out Aware Awake Alive’s peer-to-peer program at all 23 CSU campuses — with student leaders scheduled to receive training at Cal Poly beginning in January 2014.

“We remain committed to our partnerships at Cal Poly and to the opportunity to prevent deaths from alcohol poisoning,” Aware Awake Alive executive director Lisa Dow said. “Together, we remain committed to giving students the confidence and tools to save young lives from alcohol poisoning.”

For more information about Aware Awake Alive, visit www.awareawakealive.org.