

## One family's tragedy highlights startling statistics

BY CATHERINE BAUM STAFF WRITER



*Alexis Garcia with her mother, Renee Garcia, above, around Christmas time in 2006.*

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EASTHAMPTON - 'I was so wasted.' This phrase was repeated several times one evening recently at an Easthampton restaurant, where a group of teenagers discussed their weekend over dinner. They were 15, 16, or 17 years old, according to Robin Fortier, an onlooker.

A woman at a table nearby drank her coffee, eyes averted. She, like other adults in the vicinity, seemed to be avoiding looking at the teens. Meanwhile, their voices grew louder with excitement as they talked about their weekend.

Fortier was bothered by the fact that people seemed to be making a concerted effort to ignore the alarming words coming out of these young people's mouths. After all, she noted, they were essentially talking about how they broke the law.

'Other people in the restaurant were hearing the same conversation that I was hearing, and they're acting like nothing happened,' said Fortier. 'I was shocked that people wouldn't meet them eye to eye. It was like normal conversation.'

For Fortier, this conversation wasn't 'normal,' it was about as charged as it gets. Fortier's niece, Alexis Garcia, known as Lexie, died in February at age 16, after, authorities say, drinking so

heavily that her blood alcohol level was nearly four times the legal limit. The cause of death for the Easthampton High School 10th grader was attributed to drowning and alcohol poisoning.

So for Fortier, the topic of teenage drinking hits painfully close to home.

'I couldn't take it,' said Fortier, of Ashfield. 'They kept saying 'I was so wasted' as if they were wearing a badge - a badge of honor that they were so wasted. I just don't understand the mentality of these kids. Like they need to be wasted to be cool. I don't get it.'

As difficult as that mentality may be for some adults to fathom, it is in no way uncommon. According to a 2007 report done by the Strategic Planning Initiative For Families and Youth, a Northampton-based coalition focused on youth substance abuse prevention in Hampshire County, the attitudes expressed by the teenagers Fortier overheard are consistent with those of the majority of their peers in Hampshire County.

More than half of Hampshire County's teenagers have what are called 'favorable' attitudes toward drug use, which includes drinking alcohol, the report shows. The report is based on findings from the Prevention Needs Assessment Survey that eighth-, 10th- and 12th-grade students volunteered to take in spring 2007. The results of the report are presented with comparisons to national data compiled by Bach Harrison, LLC, a national research and evaluation company based in Salt Lake City.

Hampshire County teens have a 10 percent higher favorable attitude toward drug use than their nationally represented peers. The eight states used to represent the national data are Arizona, Arkansas, Louisiana, Montana, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Utah. Surveys were taken in both rural and urban areas of the eight states, creating a 'fairly representative' picture of teen perceptions of drugs and alcohol in the United States, according to Lauri Turkovsky, senior prevention science coordinator at the Western Massachusetts Center for Healthy Communities.

And drinking has greater implications, she noted. Young people who drink are more likely to do things that are immediately risky, like drink and drive, fail in school or have an unplanned pregnancy, she said. And long-term use increases their chances of becoming addicted, using other harmful substances and negatively affecting the developing adolescent brain, according to Turkovsky. In addition, roughly 16 percent of young people who drink at age 14 or younger become alcoholic as adults, while 9 percent of young people who drink between the ages of 15 and 17 are likely to be addicted later on.

'There's a whole cluster of risks that go along with youth drinking,' Turkovsky said. 'We now know that adolescents who use alcohol and marijuana can change the way their brain's neuro pathways are laid down.'

In addition, a young person who has already started to use alcohol, tobacco, marijuana or inhalants is not going back to a state of non-use, Turkovsky said. At best, prevention measures can help lessen their use, she noted.

'Once a young person has started to use, getting them back to non-use is just a fantasy,' Turkovsky said. 'The longer we delay first-youth use, the better off kids are in the short term and long term.'

### **Parents' roles highlighted**

Parents play a role in teen drinking, too. In Hampshire County, 45 percent of parents are considered to harbor a 'neutral to positive attitude' about their kids drinking alcohol and using drugs, compared to 37 percent of representative national parents, Turkovsky said.

In other words, Hampshire County teenagers, she notes 'are more likely to say, 'People in my community don't care if I use alcohol or drugs.'

Easthampton School Superintendent Deborah Carter said she thinks it is unfortunate when parents, rather than helping to find a solution to the problem, are part of the source of the problem.

Fortier said that before the death of her niece, she never knew of a time when her niece drank alcohol. She finds it alarming that there are parents who hold neutral to positive attitudes toward drinking and drug use - and she believes adults should step up when they know a teen is drinking.

'I think parents are all hush-hush,' Fortier said. 'They have the attitude of 'I got it when I was a kid.' That just doesn't wash with me, and that's not good for their kids to hear because what they should be saying is, 'I broke the law when I was a kid.'

In the case of Alexis Garcia, Timothy E. Parent, the parent of a friend of hers, is facing one count of involuntary manslaughter and two counts of furnishing alcohol to minors. Authorities allege that he gave the girls the vodka that ultimately led to Garcia's death. In addition to giving Garcia alcohol, Parent also furnished alcohol to six other minors in 2006 and 2007, authorities allege.

Meanwhile, Fortier said she appreciates the work Easthampton police put into the investigation into her niece's death, but she often thinks about how the tragedy could have been prevented.

'If something had been done last year ... if one person had spoken up,' Fortier said. 'I wonder to myself: there were six kids before this, and what, not a single parent found their kid drunk or knew their kid was drunk and didn't question them and ask them and press them, 'where did you get it?' or 'what happened?' I find that hard to believe.'

'I don't know who the kids are,' Fortier said. 'I don't know who the parents are. But I've been thinking about that aspect of it, and if someone had said something then and brought it out in the open and mentioned it to anyone with the right authority, then maybe things could have been prevented.'

Rumors that a parent would be charged in connection with Garcia's death had been swirling around for months, so when Parent was finally arraigned, it came as no surprise to some students at Easthampton High School, where Garcia was a sophomore.

'Yes he is responsible, but it's not his full blame, because so many other parents do it for their children,' said Olivia Stankowski, a 14-year-old who said she'd been friends with Garcia growing up. 'Maybe it should be a lesson, not a punishment. She was really open about everything and she was just trying to have fun.'

Stankowski said she believes that students who have parents that drink are more likely to drink themselves, especially if alcohol is out in plain sight, not locked up.

Other students noted that acquiring alcohol can be as simple as asking for it.

'It's not really that hard to get alcohol,' said Jess Nicol, a 14-year-old who played softball with Garcia for three years.

Craig Martinat, 16, said it is more common for teens to get alcohol from their older siblings than their parents, but he knows five teens who get alcohol from their parents, a concept that Martinat looked at differently after Garcia's death, which he described as a 'horrible accident'.

'I don't understand how the real message gets lost in the nostalgia,' Fortier said. 'They (parents) don't want to point fingers at anyone else because they did the same thing, but that has to stop because there's just going to be a continual cycle of tragedy because nobody wants to stand up and say 'this is wrong.'

But in fact, most parents do not willingly give their children alcohol. Rather, kids get alcohol from their families without permission, according to Turkovsky.

For that reason, she noted, parents need to monitor both their children and their alcohol.

'If you talk to parents in the area, parents who host parties for young people will tell you that most of the time they have a house full of kids, nobody's parents have called to make sure there's really a party going on, that it's supervised by adults, and that there's not going to be any alcohol or drugs served at the party,' Turkovsky said.

### **'Typical kid stuff'**

Lexie Garcia was an athlete - a Tim Daggett's Gold Medal Gymnastics gymnast for a couple of years, a softball and volleyball player - a friend, and a lovable family member. Family members maintain that she was not a drinker. Both her aunt and her mother said they never knew of a time when Lexie had drunk alcohol.

'I don't know what she was thinking about that day; I don't know her at all in that respect,' Fortier said. 'I know her as a little girl waking up with her sleepy eyes and smiling at me. I can't even

imagine how I would have felt if I saw her drunk. I would have been - and was - horrified by just the thought of it.'

Fortier and Garcia called one another 'Ti Ti Robi' and 'Lexie Girl.' Garcia slept over Fortier's house the weekend before her death, playing with Fortier's guinea pigs and 10-year-old son. The family's 'meeting place' was Garcia's grandfather's house. Fortier recalls many times when she would walk into the house to find Garcia sitting in front of her father's computer. Her niece would look up at her and say 'Ti Ti Robi love you.' Shortly after exchanging their 'love you's,' Garcia would walk into her grandfather's kitchen and sit on Fortier's lap.

'We were close,' Fortier said. 'Very close. All of us felt like we lost her like she was our own daughter. Losing her was probably one of the worst experiences in my life. She was my girl.'

Garcia also shared a special bond with her mother, Renee Garcia, who would listen to music with her daughter while driving around in the car, and dance together when the mood struck them. Garcia was scheduled to begin driving school Monday, Feb. 5, three days after she died, Fortier said.

Their dance sessions were just one of the many activities they shared, Fortier noted.

Fortier met a few of Garcia's friends, and recalls visiting one day when she her neice and her friends were hanging out. The girls were laughing and talking with each other while trying on clothes and looking in the mirror.

'They did just typical kid stuff that didn't seem to be anything to make you worry,' Fortier said. 'That's the thing. There really was nothing to make you worry. You just don't know what's going on sometimes, I guess. Until it's too late.'

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