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College President Was Student Drinker

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WEST HARTFORD -- Decades before Walter Harrison confronted campus drinking as a college president, he faced it as a college kid from Pittsburgh, away from home for the first time, prone to "stupid things."

Speaking to colleagues Friday, Harrison, president of the University of Hartford, told a lighthearted story about his freshman year at Trinity College when the school banned alcohol in the dorms and he joined a march on the state Capitol to support "booze."

On the darker side, he said, he stumbled "in an alcohol stupor" out of a dance one night and, behind the South End campus, peered over the rocky cliffs, "thinking very seriously about whether I should throw myself off of them."

Harrison, 59, with a full head of slicked-back silver hair, is known for his easy, approachable demeanor. He said he was telling the stories - the dance story for the first time publicly, he acknowledged afterward - because presidents can't reverse or even bend the culture of campus drinking without first looking in the mirror, or at least into the past.

"We can, on our campuses, set a tone and set a vision - and remember what it was like to be a student ourselves," Harrison told his peers. "It's a continual battle, not something that's going to change very quickly,"

About a dozen college and university presidents gathered in the 1877 Club on the university campus to support the Statewide Healthy Campus Initiative, which aims to reduce high-risk drinking and drug use among college students on Connecticut's campuses. The federally funded program is a partnership of several state and non-profit agencies.

There are 1,700 campus deaths a year nationwide from alcohol-related causes, reported Peter B. Rockholz, deputy commissioner at the state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.

"Drinking among young people is such an embedded part of the American culture that it's a rite of passage, unfortunately," he said.

Harrison joined a panel discussion at Friday's event, along with Western Connecticut State University President James W. Schmotter and Capital Community College President Calvin E. Woodland.

In 2004, Harrison stepped into the national spotlight when he agreed to head the NCAA's Committee on Academic Performance, which is implementing reform legislation designed to improve standards among student-athletes.

He said nothing has been harder than having to tell a parent that a student didn't survive a drunken night. Three times he has made that call, he said, all three times attending the subsequent funeral or memorial service.

About five years ago, Harrison said, a U of H student returned from a party in Springfield and was found on campus, collapsed in his car, dead of an alcohol and drug overdose. In March 2005, another student fell to his death from the second floor of an open-air mall in Cancun, Mexico,

after what authorities described as an all-night spring break drinking binge.

"When you hear about students doing stupid things, it's easy to say, 'Boy, how stupid was that,'" Harrison said. "I think it's important to remember, 'I was there once.'"

Harrison said he was a freshman at Trinity when he joined the pro-booze march, chanting "We want booze."

"I was a typical 18-year-old," he said. "I didn't react well to being told you can't do that."

Unknown to Harrison at the time, he said, a New York Times photographer snapped his picture at the rally. He said he was wearing his Trinity sweatshirt and learned of the photo a few days later in a phone call from his mother back in Pittsburgh.

"Can you imagine my mother's shame?" he said.

After the forum, Harrison said that he had never spoken publicly before about the Trinity dance, something his aides confirmed.

"I'm not ashamed of it," Harrison said. "I hope I've learned from it."

Harrison said he was a junior in 1966 and the dance was in Mather Hall.

"Obviously I had been drinking a lot, just as college students do," he said. "In today's parlance, we call it binge drinking. I remember very clearly standing on the edge.

"I think I had the same struggles that all college students have. My father had died two weeks before I went to college. Kids drink and get depressed and get suicidal. I don't think I was that way normally, but I think having had a lot to drink, I was."

A 2002 study in the Journal of American College Health found that despite new anti-drinking campaigns, alcohol-free dormitories and a decline in fraternity and sorority membership, America's college students still go on drinking binges at near-record rates. The study found that about 44 percent of college students between the ages of 18 and 23 are classified as binge drinkers, a rate that has remained stubbornly persistent over much of the past decade

Harrison said that today he drinks socially and in moderation, preferring Scotch, but also beer and wine. He said you can't preach abstinence to college kids and it helps to know something about alcohol.

"I know where it almost took me," he said.

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