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Blacked Out and Charged: Downtown Athens scene draws same crowd, more intense partiers

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Posted: Friday, February 28, 2014 1:00 pm | Updated: 6:49 pm, Wed Mar 26, 2014.

Cailin O'Brien @cailinob18 | 6 comments

The officers watched from their patrol car as the student urinated on the sidewalk and walked down South Lumpkin Street.

"It's one thing to go find a bush or do it in private," one of the arresting officers said to the dazed young man. "But to do that, on a sidewalk, walking..."

The young man paused for a moment.

"Do you want me to be honest with you or do you want me to not be honest with you?" he slurred.

"I want you to be honest with me," the officer replied.

"OK, you want me to be honest with you? Tomorrow, I'm going to North Carolina," he said.

The officer's shoulder camera feed switched off for a few moments. When it switched back on, the young man grabbed his ID from the officer's hand and took off running across South Lumpkin Street in front of oncoming



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University of Georgia Chief of Police Jimmy Williamson played a video showing varying degrees of underage intoxication to a few concerned parents.

The young man who dashed across the street to escape UGA police officers stars alongside a young man passed out in a parking lot and a young woman asleep next to a toilet in a collection of 16 clips compiled into an informative video by UGA PD during the 2013 fall semester.

Proof of the party

Athens has always known how to party — but the new generation may have taken the Classic City bar scene to a new high.

Between rising blood alcohol concentration levels and a more casual attitude toward drugs, arrested students' blood has never been messier.

"What's been just alarming to all of us in this sector is that these folks are having a minimum of two, but most of them have at least three substances in their blood system," Williamson said.

UGAPD began wearing shoulder cameras last summer to show confused parents and administrators how overboard some partiers go.

"If someone comes in to complain specifically about their son or daughter [being arrested], or if their son or daughter wants to come by and complain . . . I can say, 'I understand. Won't you please come by and look at the video of that night? We video it,'" Williamson said. "And they go, 'Oh, really? You video it?'"

Rising BACs

The scene UGAPD's cameras capture isn't always flattering.

In the early hours of Feb. 5, a cab driver carried a woman into the lobby of Creswell Hall and left, according to a UGA police report. As the 18-year-old woman struggled to enter her UGA ID number into the hand scanner in Creswell Hall, a graduate resident noticed and called the police.

Her breathalyzer test registered BAC levels of 0.259 and 0.304 grams, according to the report.

The student, who stands at 5-feet-4 tall and weighs about 125 pounds, would have needed to drink about nine beers in a three-hour period to register the BAC levels she did, according to an online blood alcohol calculator.

Williamson said he worries levels like this in young twenty-somethings could indicate substance abuse problems.

"Someone who can drink to that level, that's not just 'I'm going out tonight and drinking to that point. Your body has to build a tolerance,'" he said. "They've been drinking over a longer period of time, they've been drinking larger amounts over that period of time. I mean, you're a very experienced drinker to be getting into the 0.20s and 0.30s."

But those levels aren't unusual in Athens anymore.

"The alcohol levels that we're seeing now are much greater and we are noticing that versus five, seven years ago, we're having to involve EMS a little more than we used to," Williamson said. "We're seeing in the 0.30s more than we ever have."

Georgia considers drivers over the age of 21 "intoxicated by law" if they are found to have a 0.08 or higher BAC level. That level stands at 0.02 for underage offenders.

downtown graffiti

Crossword March 26

What To Do Today

O Athens Where Art Thou?

Wed, Mar 26, 11:00 pm EDT
Green Room, Athens

Open Mic Night at Boar's Head Lounge

Wed, Mar 26, 11:00 pm EDT
Boar's Head, Athens

Trivia at Copper Creek

Wed, Mar 26, 9:00 pm EDT
Copper Creek Brewing Company, Athens

Movie Trivia at Little Kings

Wed, Mar 26, 9:00 pm EDT
Little Kings Shuffle Club, Athens

Karaoke at The Office Lounge

Wed, Mar 26, 9:00 pm EDT
The Office Lounge, Athens

Full Contact Trivia at Blind Pig Tavern

Wed, Mar 26, 8:00 pm EDT
Blind Pig Tavern-West, Athens

Writers After Dark

Wed, Mar 26, 8:00 pm EDT
The Globe, Athens,

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The Red & Black reported 33 DUI arrests that included BAC levels in 2013.

Most impaired drivers in Athens that year blew at least a 0.10. That means, 27 out of 33 DUI offenders cruised the streets at least 25 percent over the legal limit, according to UGA police reports.

Seven of those offenders blew a 0.20 or more — at least 150 percent over the legal limit.

The Red & Black reached out to 20 DUI offenders charged in 2013 — 12 were unavailable and eight declined to comment about their arrests.

"We're in a culture of party, party, party," Williamson said. "And I like to have a good time, too, but I think we're so into the party thing we aren't talking about some of the unintended consequences from frequent and large amounts of consumption."

Lee Rushton knows some students don't confine that consumption to alcohol.

Rushton serves as director of the Athens DUI/Drug Court, a "programmatic probation" that concentrates on treating offenders of multiple DUIs.

Of the 89 participants in the DUI/Drug Court program, he said approximately 11 are college students from UGA and the surrounding colleges and universities.

"It's kind of a generalization with my statement, but just from observation and experience, we're usually dealing with multiple substances, not just alcohol," Rushton said. "I would think that's more often than not the case."

Baby boozers don't bolster

Still, the number of night owls in Athens doesn't seem to be growing.

UGAPD splits about 900 underage arrests per year with Athens-Clarke County Police, Georgia State Patrol, Athens Probation Office and the Clarke County Sheriff's Office.

Williamson said students who do the math are usually surprised the downtown bar scene doesn't produce more underage arrests than about three a day.

"We've got 34,000 young people ourselves right here at UGA and we're kind of like the lighthouse," Williamson said. "We've got Clemson [University] and Emory [University] that come over. You've got University of North Georgia, Piedmont [College] — college students are coming, high school students — everybody's coming for the music scene. Downtown's a big attraction."

In fact, UGAPD made 50 less underage possession arrests in 2013 than in 2012.

The number of underage possession arrests charged with probation hasn't changed much either.

"We're averaging about 600 cases a year, and that's been pretty steady," said Chief Probation Officer for ACC Dale Allen. "Some years it looks like it might have bumped up a little higher than 600, but 600's a good average."

Allen said he couldn't aggregate exact numbers of underage probations per year, due to a switch in the system when the Pretrial Intervention Program merged with probation.



Partying in the past

UGA alums Jana Miller and Dan Matthews can't remember a time when partying wasn't a crucial part of the Athens experience.

"When I first got here it was like, kegs and parties and people hanging out," Matthews said. "Lots of underage drinking in the dorms."

In fact, Miller and Matthews said underage drinking was simpler when they took in the Athens party scene in the '80s — no fake IDs necessary.

All bars admitted underage students over the age of 18 and marked their hands with a red stamp. Bar-goers over the age of 21 received a green stamp.

Miller said the system wasn't hard to trick. Her "of age" friends would come out of the bar and press drivers licenses to the wet ink on their hands.

The stamp would transfer onto the license and could then be re-stamped onto the hand of an underage student.

"You could stamp like two people with that," Miller said.

Still, both alumni admitted the way UGA parties has intensified.

"I don't think there's more people partying now than there were, percentage-wise, but I think they just have taken it to another level," Miller said.

The alums agree students have changed up the Athens drug scene.

Matthews said he remembered seeing students smoking weed and dabbling in cocaine.

But both he and Miller said they felt prescription drugs now play a part in a night out in Athens that they hadn't in the past.

"That seems to be a relatively new thing," Miller said. "I don't remember anybody experimenting with prescription drugs or anything like that — at all."

Explaining the experience

Nobody seems to know exactly why party culture has intensified over the years.

Neither Allen nor Rushton can explain why — they're just tracking the numbers and dealing with the repercussions.

The arrested students might have some of the answers, but none shared the reasons with The Red & Black. Not even Williamson knows for sure, but he has a theory.

"I don't think we do enough to talk about it in our households. I think a lot of parents of today just think it's kind of that process you go through when you're young," he said.

Williamson said he can understand that concept to a degree.

"I don't totally disagree with that concept, but I still think it needs to be talked about," he said. "Because if it's not talked about then people don't know where those social parameters are."

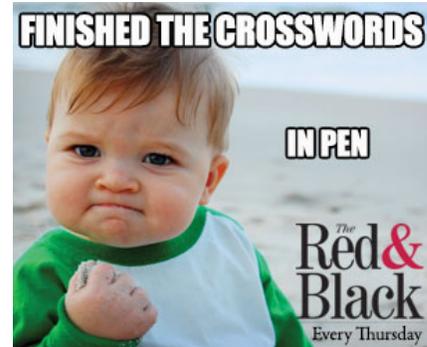
It's the lack of these parameters that makes the footage UGA police officer's cameras capture so telling.

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6 comments:

ugatiger26 posted at 3:49 pm on Fri, Feb 28, 2014.

Posts: 85

Good. I am not aware of that law. I would imagine a lot of parents aren't either.

Either way, lots of parents don't teach their children how to drink. I had a similar upbringing. My parents let me have my first glass of champagne when I was 12 or 13. First beer around 15.

I think too many parents leave it up to schools and D.A.R.E courses which most adolescents blow off.

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Terance Schmidt posted at 3:20 pm on Fri, Feb 28, 2014.

Posts: 2

With respect to UGAtiger, I've read that Georgia law allows for under 21 consumption with parental consent in private, non-alcohol-selling premises. So if you want to give your own kid a beer in your own home, you're free to do so.

<http://drinkingage.procon.org/view.resource.php?resourceID=002591>

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ugatiger26 posted at 3:04 pm on Fri, Feb 28, 2014.

Posts: 85

Yeah, the Greek system is the "heart of the issue."

Try again.

What do you mean no one wants to discuss that openly? People talk about Greeks and alcohol all the time.

The Greek system is an effect in this case. Not the cause.

The cause is closer to what Terance is talking about, although I don't think it's just religious families. It's families in general who don't want to touch the issue or allow their children to partake in alcohol because it's against the law (which I think is ridiculous)

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Terance Schmidt posted at 12:40 pm on Fri, Feb 28, 2014.

Posts: 2

Personally, I think a big part of the problem is that you have kids coming in from families where drinking isn't done or even talked about, because of religion. Then they get here and go wild, making it a challenge to see how much they can drink.

I grew up in a family where I was allowed a little beer, a little wine, from a fairly young age. By sixteen, my buddy and I would get some beer, go down in the basement and play video games. At 21, alcohol wasn't a big deal. Go out, hang out, have two or three, knock it off in plenty of time to sober up to drive home. I had learned to drink responsibly without even getting "an alcohol talk".

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self-deprecate posted at 9:49 am on Thu, Feb 27, 2014.

Posts: 5

The heart of this issue is the greek system in Athens. But no one wants to discuss that openly.

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self-deprecate posted at 9:48 am on Thu, Feb 27, 2014.

Posts: 5

Glad to see some attention brought to this issue. UGA is cranking out functional addicts, and only the lucky ones are leaving functional. There is a substance abuse problem in Athens, Ga.

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