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WHO'S TO BLAME?

The law says underage boozing is OK at home. Victim's parents say that's not right

For parents of a teenager, it's a recurring nightmare.

It's the weekend and with fake ID in hand, your kids have picked up booze at the LCBO and headed off to a "pre-drink" at someone's house. Suitably hammered, they then stop off at another friend for more shots. And still more.

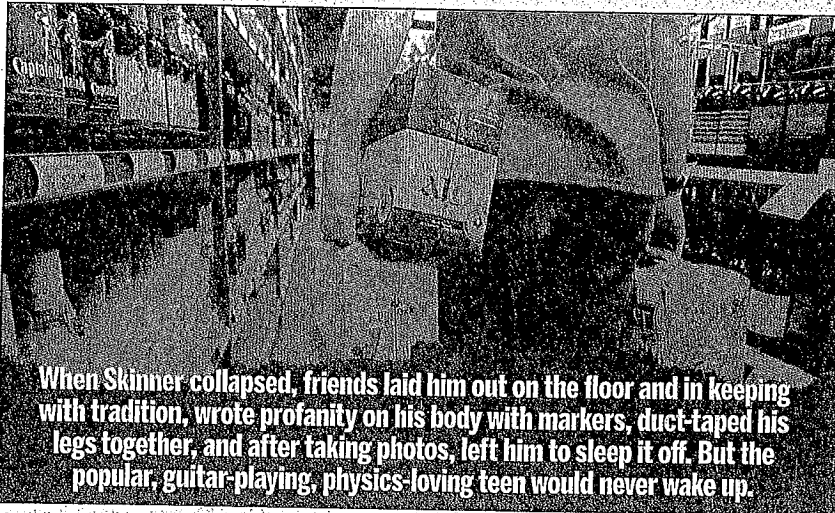
They then inform you they'll be sleeping out that night so you can't check exactly what state they're in.

Of course they're your responsibility. But you can lecture all you want about underage drinking, the dangers of bingeing, the importance of moderation. It goes in one ear and out the other. These kids believe they are invincible.

Christopher Skinner is proof they are not.

In June 2010, on the family room floor of a buddy's Hamilton-area home, the brilliant Grade 12 grad with three part-time jobs and an acceptance to U of T died of acute alcohol poisoning. After consuming a 26-ounce bottle of rye and several beers earlier in the night, the 17-year-old went to Kyle Baron's house where he chugged a five-ounce glass of screech rum.

When Skinner collapsed, friends laid him out on the floor and in keeping with tradition, wrote profanity on his body with markers, duct-taped his legs together, and after taking photos, left him to sleep it off. But the popular, guitar-playing, physics-loving teen would never wake up.



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Who's to blame?

His parents are now suing the homeowners, Doug and Wendy Baron, who testified at last month's inquest that while they knew Skinner had passed out after drinking in their home — Wendy Baron had even written on the boy's feet — they were too intoxicated themselves to check on him. The teen was found dead the next morning from nearly five times the legal alcohol limit in his lanky body.

According to the *Hamilton Spectator*, the inquest heard the Barons

were aware of the underage drinking but felt it was safer for their son to party at home than elsewhere.

The \$1.4-million lawsuit launched earlier this month will eventually determine whether they were negligent. The Barons have yet to file a defence, but according to the letter of the law, they did nothing illegal.

Unlike other provinces, it's not an offence in Ontario to permit underage drinking in your home as long as you're not the one providing the booze.

Your kids' friends can be invited over to play beer pong until they all black out and as long as it was b.y.o.b., you aren't running afoul of any law.

Surely that has to change.

Binge drinking is a serious problem. After a cultural shift, these teens have got the message about not drinking and driving — no one in my kids' peer group would get behind the wheel of a car after a night of partying. But consuming to excess is another story.

A 2011 report by the Centre

for Addiction and Mental Health found that at least monthly, 22% of Ontario high school students have five or more drinks in one sitting.

For age and expense reasons, they aren't doing it in a bar. Instead, they're in someone's basement — with or without the parents being home. If those adults knew they could be charged if police happen by their door — whether for a noise complaint or worse, one of those drunken teens needing help — perhaps they'd no longer look the other way.

After two weeks of testimony, the inquest jury looking into Skinner's death believes just that. It has made 16 non-binding recommendations, including one that would fine or jail any adult who allows a minor who's not their own child to drink alcohol in their home.

At a press conference last week, Skinner's parents welcomed the proposals but worried whether they will ever see the light of day.

"We hope to see these changes implemented," Christopher's mother, Michelle Skinner, told reporters.

"To me, it's strange that we should have to do anything," added the boy's father, Brian. "You'd think that there would be somebody out there that's already trying to make these things happen."

It's already too late for their son — but hopefully not for others.

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