

Local filmmakers document perils of college binge drinking

BY ANDREW WINEKE

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Pete Schuermann, Rob Watt and Nancy Theken were not angels in college, and they're not arguing for prohibition in "Haze," their documentary on the dangers of binge drinking.

But, the filmmakers say, something has changed in the two decades since they were knocking back brews in college. "Today," Watt said, "throwing up is nothing."

Drinking on college campuses has become a competitive sport, a contest just like intramural football.

"What I see as the difference is that when we were drinking, we were drinking with each other," said Watt, the film's producer. "We weren't drinking against each other."

The current state of affairs came as something of a surprise to the local filmmakers. None of them had spent much time on college campuses recently until The Gordie Foundation hired their company, Watt Imagination, to produce a documentary on the dangers of fraternity hazing and alcohol abuse.

The foundation was set up by the family of Gordie Bailey, a University of Colorado freshman who died of alcohol poisoning in 2004 following a fraternity initiation ceremony in which a group of pledges drank four bottles of whiskey and six bottles of wine.

After Bailey passed out, the fraternity members left him to sleep it off on a couch.

In the fall of 2006, the filmmakers took their cameras to CU Boulder to capture the party scene in the opening weeks of the school year and quickly realized there was a larger story to tell.

"We reached a point and realized it was a bigger project than we thought," Schuermann, the film's director, said. "Not because of the burden of it, but because of the material we could get. It kept growing and growing."

That material includes a lot of college students, at CU and elsewhere, acting like idiots. The filmmakers were shouted at, threatened, they saw students vomiting, students passed out, students bleeding after fights or falling.

At one point, they were surrounded by an angry group of drunken ROTC students. A quick-thinking EMT defused the situation.

"He said, 'Don't you know who these guys are?'" Schuermann said. "'That movie about the penguins? That's these guys!'"

This stuff would be funny as isolated incidents, but, as Bailey's story shows, it can have tragic

results.

The documentary returns again and again to Bailey's story, including interviews with his friends, his sister, his mother, the EMTs who found him, and shots of his body from the morgue.

"Somebody talking about the problem wasn't going to make that much of a difference," Schuermann said. "We had to show it, not tell it.

"We had lots of pictures of kids passed out on couches," he said. "We needed to show, not just talk about, that one of these kids could not wake up."

The filmmakers are hoping "Haze" will appear in film festivals early next year and then find wider distribution. Bailey's family, they said, would be happy if the film can be shown to college freshman and high school seniors - 150 colleges have already asked for copies, Watt said, and copies should be available by fall.

The film won't be on DVD until 2009, but the filmmakers are holding a sneak preview Saturday at Kimball's Twin Peak Theater.

Watt and Theken each have college-aged children. Watching a 10-minute trailer of "Haze" didn't stop Watt's son and his friends from going out drinking. But it did, he said, prompt one of them to call 911 after another student passed out.

"Drinking too much alcohol can kill you," Watt said. "If kids don't get anything else out of this film, it's that they watch over their friends."

'HAZE'

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Kimball's Twin Peak Theater, 115 E. Pikes Peak Ave.

Tickets: \$7.50, 447-1947, www.kimballstwinpeak.com