

Alcohol is drug of choice for teens

By ANGELA BLACKBURN
Parents shouldn't take alcohol use by their sons and daughters lightly since alcohol remains the drug - often an acceptable one - of choice among teens, says a Halton Board of Education health expert.

And while the Halton board has been a frontrunner in drug education, it can't compete with TV, peer and role model influences, says board health and physical education coordinator Sue Amos.

Amos and consultant Susan Orchard bore noteworthy facts and figures to a recent board meeting, where a review of the drug education program was presented to trustees.

Trustees heard that even while the Halton board is five years ahead of Ministry of Education directives on drug education, it still can't do the job of steering youths and teens away from drugs on its own.

"It takes 30 hours a year to change attitude. It takes 50 hours a year to change a behavior. Students receive two to five hours a year on drug education and they watch 22 hours of television a week," said Amos.

In a symposium where students offered their views and opinions on drug use - a symposium upon which the Halton board reviewed and rewrote its drug education curriculum last spring - students listed television as one of the influencing factors in their lives.

"Schools can't be the sole provider of drug education. The piece of the pie is too small. It's got to involve parents, the community, the police, the media, churches and government. Together we can make a difference," said Amos.

Parental reactions to the discovery of student drug use ranged from being embarrassed or confused to relief if the drug was alcohol, according to a survey the students answered.

"Over and over again we heard that parents were relieved if they discovered drug use and the drug

had been alcohol and not illicit drugs," said Amos.

But underlining the study was the fact that there are more non-users.

"Drug use is down currently and that includes tobacco," said Amos. According to the Addiction Research Foundation the reasons include conservatism among adolescents today, a perception that drugs are harder to find now, and concern about the health risks attached to drug use.

Asked about what drugs are used in Halton, students responded by listing alcohol, hashish, marijuana and LSD.

However, Amos cautioned, alcohol and tobacco aren't always seen as drugs.

Alcohol remains accessible, acceptable and the least harmful alternative in the eyes of youth, she said.

Students were also quizzed on parties. The party was identified as the vehicle for alcohol and drug consumption, as well as sexual relations. Typical adolescent activities such as hanging around, going to movies and shopping malls, "paled in comparison to the party," according to Amos.

Drug education begins in kindergarten in Halton public schools, where students begin to learn about the types and use of medication. It continues through high school.

Parents should combat drug use by spending time with their children, maintaining good relations and role modeling, the health experts said.

"Sometimes parents are afraid of communicating because they don't know as much about drug use as the youths," said Orchard.

"You've got to talk to your son or daughter. You need to show you care, love and trust them. There's no substitute for good parenting no matter how much education we provided," offered Amos.

DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education), a program run in the Grade 6 classes by Halton Regional Police, was recognized as one of the more outstanding local programs on drug education.

However trustees heard that even with increased board and service club funding, 17 classes couldn't get the program last year (32 did).

The Halton Region health department also runs a host of

other drug education programs, including individual school health fairs and student-run awareness programs.

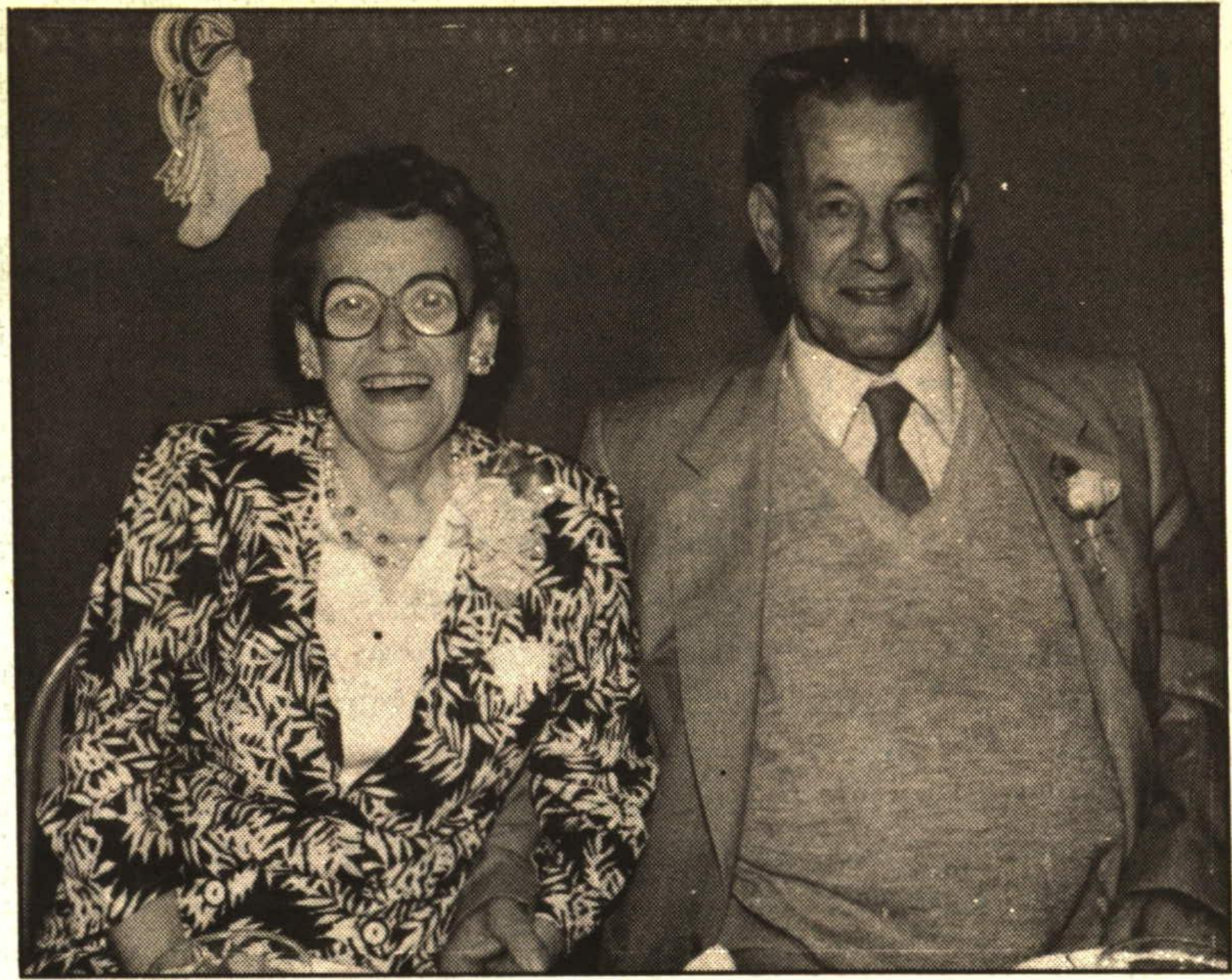
Trustee Janis Millman questioned the availability of drug education in high schools.

In high school, one physical education/health credit is mandatory, but that's all, she was told.

The most important times to expose a student to drug education are transition years - before they go to a new middle or high school. "That's a time when a child who is normally not at risk will be at risk," said Amos.

Asked what alternative to smoking might be suggested, Amos said, "Soccer, baseball, road hockey, Nintendo, heaven forbid."

"Those are choices which involve socialization. Teens can see it as something they can enjoy and still being with a group of friends," she said.



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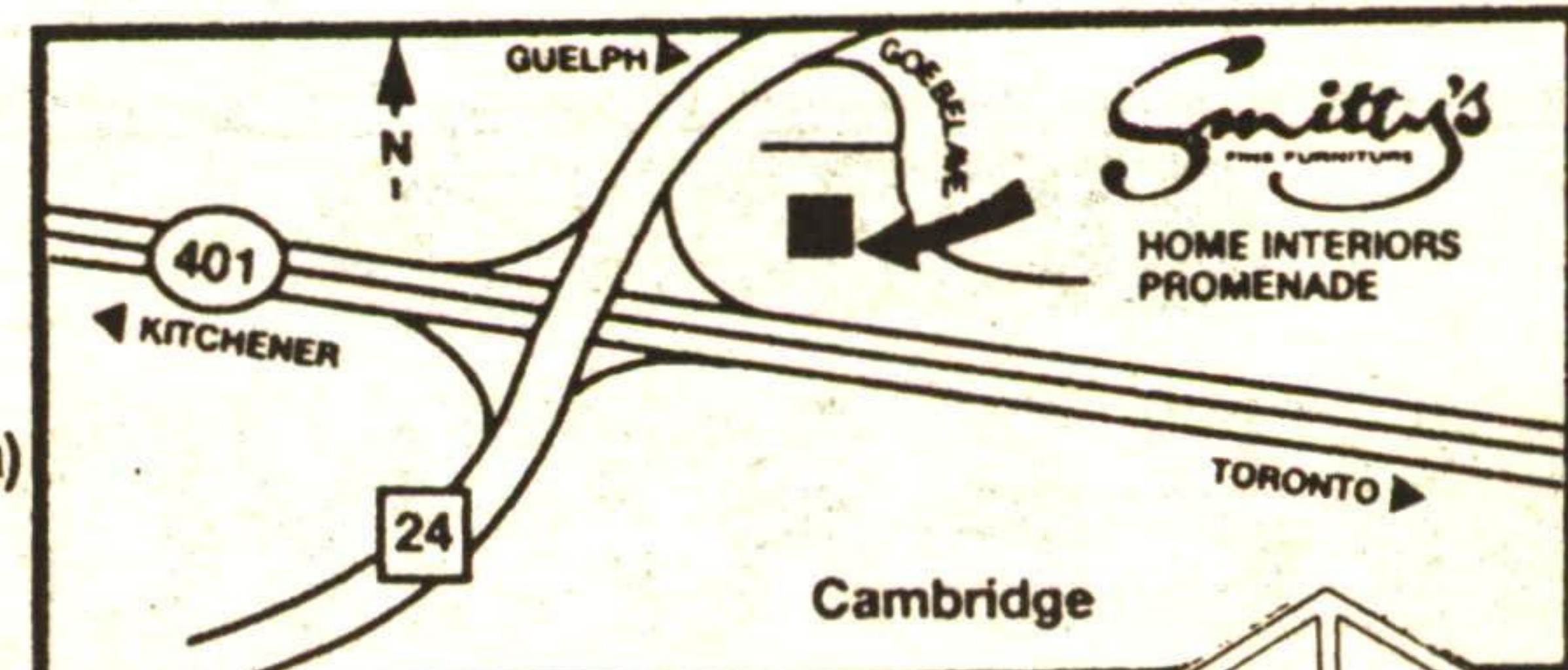
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