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Juggler presents anti-drinking message with act

By Nancy Thompson
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MANCHESTER — Bill Ross learned to juggle when he quit drinking. He put in an estimated six hours a day — time that he used to spend imbibing or recovering from it — to hone the art of throwing and catching tennis balls, pins, and knives.

On Thursday, he combined those skills with details of his personal story and data on the effects of alcohol use in a presentation for 450 freshmen at Manchester High School.

Marla Mandel of the Manchester Youth Services Bureau told the freshmen that they may face more pressure to drink now that they're entering high school, where they'll be mingling with older teen-agers.

"When you're at parties people will offer you alcohol. You don't have to drink it," she said, adding that half of teen-agers nationwide report that they don't drink regularly.

Ross' performance, which was sponsored by the Coalition to Prevent Underage Drinking, gave an idea of what happened to those who do.

Illustrating his words by juggling various objects — including, at one point, a flaming torch, a knife, and a bowling ball to show the

difficulties he was having in balancing parts of his life — Ross held the students' attention as he recited details of his life.

He pointed to a scar on his hand that he received in ninth grade when he and two friends skipped school to drink in his house and he punched a window while goofing around. He described the blackout that followed and recalled waking up on an operating table, his mother looking on.

He listed signs that a person's drinking is a problem — including blackouts, a craving for alcohol, drinking to feel "normal" — and urged the students to discuss their problems with someone, rather than blot them out with alcohol. Resources include the Youth Services Bureau, the school's resource officers, and counseling that can be arranged by dialing 211, the state's Infoline program, he said.

As students focused on his hands and the items they passed through the air, Ross gave information about alcohol poisoning — never leave a friend alone to sleep it off, but get help, he said — and abusive behavior related to alcohol use.

Eighty percent of the men who commit "date rape," or acquaintance rape, have used alcohol, along with 55 percent of the women who are victims, he told the students.

Several students said Ross' antics kept their attention focused on information they've heard before.

"You have to be told things over and over," freshman Kyle Michaud said.

Freshman Matt Munafo said it was good to hear the information again. "It keeps you aware," he said. "It may not be a problem now, but maybe in the future."

The two MHS resource officers, Bob Johnson and Martin Jordan, said the presentation was important because the students are going through a transition as they start high school and will be making choices that will affect their futures.

"It's important to address the issue today," Johnson said. "If you don't address it and be up front with it, they're going to find out on their own."

Gabe Smith, an MHS junior who addressed the freshmen, said the new students are vulnerable as they find their way in the large high school. Giving them information and letting them know that other students choose not to drink can help them make decisions, he said.

Smith, who has appeared in locally produced public service announcements that encourage teen-agers not to drink, said he's gotten support from his peers.