

Age of reason

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As a former college president, John McCardell knows all about binge drinking on campuses. What he wants to do about it might surprise you.

By Irene Sege, Globe Staff | June 2, 2007

MIDDLEBURY, Vt. -- John M. McCardell Jr., former president of Middlebury College, listens as the recent graduates who serve as residential advisers recount the excesses they've witnessed. They've accompanied students suffering alcohol poisoning to the hospital. They've stumbled on buckets of vomit and dealt with sexual assaults that involved alcohol.

After more than three decades at Middlebury, as history professor and provost and president, none of this is news to McCardell. What he wants to do about it might surprise some, however.

He wants to lower the drinking age to 18.

Here he is, in a lounge of the new athletic center, to talk about the nonprofit called Choose Responsibility that he recently established to push for just such a change.

McCardell has been on campus long enough to remember sharing wine with undergraduates at faculty-student gatherings when the drinking age was 18. He envisions adults modeling responsible drinking. He remembers the intoxicated 22-year-old student who died during his presidency in a drunk en-driving crash, and talks of focusing on abuses of alcohol rather than consumption.

He proposes allowing states to pilot alcohol education programs for 18-to-20 year-olds who are out of high school and then issue so-called "drinking licenses" to young people who successfully complete the course. He faces a tough sell. Among his opponents are Mothers Against Drunk Driving and former Health, Education, and Welfare Secretary Joseph Califano.

"If binge drinking has never been worse, why do we think legal age 21 has been successful?" McCardell says. "Drinking is taking place in out-of-sight places and in

settings that increase the risk of harm to the individuals who are consuming alcohol and anyone who finds themselves in their path. I think we can do better."

'The chance to educate'

McCardell enters Choose Responsibility's barely furnished new quarters above a downtown ski shop. He is 57 and silver-haired, 6-foot-1 and boyishly slim, impeccably dressed in black pants, black penny loafers, gold blazer, white button-down shirt, and rust tie. He was raised in Frederick, Md., and earned his bachelor's degree from Washington and Lee University in Virginia, and his voice still carries a trace of the South when he tells his two young staffers that the Seattle drive-time talk radio show that had booked him for 30 minutes kept him a full hour.

Next morning he'll be on a radio show in Grand Rapids, Mich. Later he hears from a station in Calgary, in Alberta, Canada, where some want to raise the drinking age to 21 to curb alcohol-related violence. Grace Kronenberg, a 2006 Middlebury grad, hands McCardell three checks totaling \$650 in contributions. "Hot dog," he says.

Though he insists the interest reflects the issue, not him, the stature of the messenger clearly plays a part. McCardell retired as Middlebury president in 2004 after a 13-year-tenure during which he piloted the college through substantial growth. Tony Pals, spokesman for the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, places him "in the upper echelon of effective presidents."

Under McCardell, the college increased enrollment, from 2,000 students to 2,350, while becoming more selective, going from accepting one third of applicants to accepting fewer than a quarter. McCardell raised \$300 million, and the bucolic campus bears evidence of the building boom he oversaw, including the athletic center, a new science center named for him, and a new library. The Burlington Free Press named him 2000's Vermonter of the Year.

It was not until McCardell left the presidency to return to teaching history that he publicly challenged what he calls "legal age 21," but, while still at Middlebury's helm, he approached Vermont legislators about foregoing the federal money tied to the older drinking age. He abandoned the idea after realizing Middlebury and other colleges couldn't make up a shortfall that exceeded \$12 million annually.

In a 2004 op-ed piece in The New York Times, McCardell called the 21-year-old drinking age "bad social policy and terrible law." Since 1984 legislation linking highway funds to the higher drinking age, campuses have become "either arms of the law or havens from the law," McCardell wrote. "Colleges," he continued, "should be

given the chance to educate students, who in all other respects are adults, in the appropriate use of alcohol, within campus boundaries and out in the open."

No consensus

McCardell's effort comes at a time when the US Surgeon General has issued a "call to action" to curb underage drinking. A recent report by Columbia University's National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, headed by Califano, found that the frequency of binge drinking and intoxication among college students is increasing. "Availability is the mother of use," Califano says. "That's what lowering the drinking age would do."

Much as they agree a serious problem exists, the consensus ends there. Henry Wechsler, the Harvard School of Public Health lecturer who popularized the term "binge drinking," worries that lowering the drinking age "would make alcohol, which is too much available now for underage youth, even more available." Ralph Hingson of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism notes that drinking among high school seniors has declined since the drinking age went up.

In April, McCardell traveled to MADD headquarters in Dallas. MADD, citing peer-reviewed research, counts 22,000 highway deaths averted by raising the drinking age, but McCardell suggests the credit belongs to improved road and car safety as well as MADD's own public education.

"He wanted to meet in Washington. We insisted on Dallas. We wanted him to walk our halls. On every hallway there are pictures of members and the people they lost," says MADD chief executive Charles A. Hurley. "John McCardell is a very engaging guy on many levels, but he's not a good listener. He's like a dog with a bone."

McCardell's supporters cite other research, saying such problems as alcohol-related fights, vandalism, and social difficulties among college students have worsened. Michael Haines, who works with colleges as director of the National Social Norms Resource Center at Northern Illinois University, says he's met few college presidents or administrators who favor the 21-year-old drinking age.

"Numerous studies show that when you drive any substance underground the usage patterns are more dangerous," Haines says. "In places where there's strict enforcement, those who continue to drink do so in more dangerous ways. It changes the location to a more dangerous location. It changes the consumption to more rapid consumption. Or they change substances. Instead of drinking beer they smuggle in a half pint they can drink in the bathroom."

In another recent trip, McCardell traveled to Dartmouth College, where president James Wright applauds his quest.

"Our students are adults, and they need to be treated as adults," Wright says. "Obviously there are a lot of abuses of alcohol. It's the abuses that need to be treated. People who violate the laws, driving laws, should be punished."

A call for discussion

On campus, McCardell is affectionately known as "Johnny Mac." The Civil War seminar he teaches is so popular he runs two sections. McCardell announced the founding of Choose Responsibility in an interview with the Middlebury Campus, the college's newspaper, and the Associated Press picked up the story. The Campus endorsed his campaign in an editorial, calling it "a smart proposal that would begin to address the dangerous drinking climate that young people face today."

At 22, Choose Responsibility staffer Kronenberg is not far removed from the college drinking scene. "Saturday afternoon at Middlebury you'll see kids walking around with rolling suitcases and two or three 30-packs of beer in them," she says. "Drinking is goal-oriented. It is an activity in and of itself. It's something you need to do before you go to the event. Drinking and socializing have become separate experiences. I find that completely disconcerting."

Middlebury students need only drive two hours north, to Montreal, where the drinking age is 18, to buy beer in a bar. Indeed, McCardell notes that among countries where buying alcohol is legal, the only nations where people must wait until they're 21 are Indonesia, Mongolia, and Palau. When his critics say that American 15- and 16-year-olds report less binge drinking -- five or more drinks per occasion -- in the past month than teens in 18 of 19 European countries studied, McCardell differentiates between five beers consumed over a long evening and five shots of vodka chugged in an hour or two.

Ever the historian, McCardell opened the 224-page report that forms the basis of Choose Responsibility with a review of the history of temperance and prohibition in the United States. He applies the historian's lens, as well, to critics who insist research is on their side.

"Science was once summoned to prove the world was flat. Science was once summoned to prove the earth revolves around the sun. One needs to be respectful of science. One doesn't need to let an argument end where science ends," he says.

"There are very few issues on which there is only one correct or defensible point of view. That's why I think if public discourse takes place my views have a reasonable chance of prevailing. I certainly don't intend to be obnoxious about it or condescending or intolerant about it or arrogant about it. All I want is discussion." ■