

Let's keep the drinking age at 21

"Insane, absolutely insane."

That is the opinion of Sen. Marilyn Rasmussen of Eatonville on the push by 123 college presidents in the nation to consider lowering the drinking age from 21 to 18. Sen. Rasmussen's opinion matters, and here's why:

This is the 20th anniversary of a bill she sponsored back in 1988 mandating a one-year suspension of driving privileges for youths 13 through 17 if they are convicted of being in possession of alcohol, or 13 to 21 if they are caught possessing drugs. The law so far has resulted, she tells me, in 25,000 driver license suspensions. I called her to ask what she thinks of a proposal by 100 college presidents, now up to 123, the only one from this state Loren Anderson of Pacific Lutheran University, to lower the drinking age as a way to control binge drinking.

"What are they going to do, tell kids it's OK to drink?" Sen. Rasmussen said. "What kind of message

does that send out? Give them a pat on the back and say boys will be boys, kids will be kids?"

What, I asked, would you do about binge drinking if you were a college official? "I would expel them," she said. "What are they going to college for? It's not part of education. It's not good social policy. Once, at St. Martin's college in Olympia, some kids who were binge drinking turned on a water hose and did \$100,000 damage to a building that was being remodeled. They went to jail. Even if there had not been any vandalism, they should have gone to jail. If you're under age and drink, there have got to be consequences, and they have got to be harsh. It's a crime."

The Rasmussen law got its court test after a Port Orchard boy, David Weese, 15, was caught drinking beer behind South Kitsap High School in the fall of 1990. He was convicted but the yearlong suspension takes

effect when the final verdict is handed down no matter how long it takes, and his case was appealed. He was able to get a driver's license at 16 and drive while he awaited further court action.

His father, N. "Hoss" Weese, said the law was unconstitutional because his son wasn't driving while drinking, but a state appeals court ruled it was OK. Weese said he'd take it to the U.S. Supreme Court but I have no record he did and the law is still on the books. Sen. Rasmussen is not the only one in opposition to lowering the age. Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) said it would just up the fatal auto accidents.

The last time Washington voters had a say on the subject was 1973 when the Legislature passed an executive request bill by Gov. Dan Evans authorizing minors 19 and 20 to drink. The bill started out at 18 but its sponsors were persuaded to up it because too many 18-year olds were still in

high school and could make liquor available to younger students. A referendum drive was swift and Ref. 36 barely went down, 495,624 (49.26 percent) for and 510,491 (50.74 percent) against.

In 1984, the feds said any state allowing a drinking age lower than 21 would lose its federal highway funds. That law has to be reauthorized next year, however, to continue.

Service personnel used to be free to drink regardless of age when off base. In the mid-1990s, that changed. They had to obey the drinking laws of the state their base was in. If it was a foreign base, the laws of the local entity. The Marines in 1997 set their own drinking age, 21 on or off base, later amending that to 18 if the host nation allowed it.

I oppose a change. I lost a grandson who, full of beer, drove a Volkswagen into a utility pole. He was 18.

(Adele Ferguson can be reached at P.O. Box 69, Hansville, WA 98340.)