SPRING WEEKEND: THERE’S A MESSAGE IN THE MADNESS

The University of Connecticut's Spring Weekend 2004 is history. To put the week behind us without a single fatality, unauthorized fire or flipped car -- and to do so with a crowd exceeding 20,000 young people fueled by the volatile mix of hormones and alcohol -- is almost a miracle. Who knows what would have happened without the phalanx of police officers, the portable medical triage center and the helicopter-borne heat sensor to locate passed-out students?

When I arrived at UConn 20 years ago, the planning process for Spring Weekend involved a small committee charged with putting on a good party for students before they hit the homestretch toward finals. Now the process requires a yearlong, multi-agency task force concerned with riot control and public relations, funded by tax dollars and tuition payments. What's going on with youth culture?

Before planning starts for next year, there are two aspects about Spring Weekend that I wish to highlight. First is the environmental pollution, which, ironically, began on Earth Day, the first night of the party. Second, and much more serious, is that even the best public safety efforts deal only with the symptoms (the drunken throng) of the much larger problem (increasing levels of financially related stress in young people).

Early Sunday morning (the morning after), I took a drive out to inspect the scene within sight of UConn's gleaming new buildings and inviting pedestrian pathways. The noise pollution was gone: No more helicopter blades thopping, ambulances wailing, young people chanting. The visual pollution had peaked: Police tape, twisted mailboxes, polychrome litter and broken glass were widely strewn. And except for the pizza crusts, chicken bones and toilet paper blowin' in the wind, the surge of nutrient pollution was just beginning to work its way into streams and ponds.

Sometimes I wonder how much phosphorus and nitrogen are vomited into the woods, peed on the grass or flushed down toilets by 20,000 tapped-out human urinary tracts going full blast for three nights -- a nutrient overload equivalent to that of a small city.

What will happen to the tons of broken glass, thick as pavement in some places and being pulverized to razor-sharp dust by automobile tires? And who will pay for vandalism to dozens of private mailboxes, dismembered and crushed as if struck by a human tornado?

Most of the revelers are UConn students just blowing off some steam before final exams during what has become an annual rite of spring. A few of the visitors are hostile invaders, coming to crash the party, to slash and burn, perhaps out of resentment for the improving quality of life at UConn. But the vast majority of revelers, students and non-students alike, are nice people.

So why the mass inebriation, mess and vandalism? Why the steady increases in numbers?

Being a UConn professor and the parent of a UConn student, I've come up with an answer that works for me. The stress of final exams is now only the tip of the iceberg.

Getting plastered helps alleviate the excruciating stress they feel -- even without final exams -- about the runaway national debt, the likelihood of military service, a tight job market being eroded by outsourcing, credit card dealers and permanently high prices for education, housing and gasoline. Getting together en masse, students and non-students alike, is very supportive; they feel their strength in numbers.
It's almost like a political rally. Each year, a special-interest group that I dub "the young and the anxious" holds its annual march on the mall called X-Lot, carrying drinks instead of protest banners. Their bonding issue is the anxiety they feel growing up at a time when financial adolescence is being extended and made more difficult each day by misguided national and corporate policies.

Student concerns about the natural environment pale in comparison to their angst about the economic environment that they will soon be competing within.

Perhaps this explains why one of my colleagues -- a wetlands expert, no less -- counted 15 plastic keg cups floating in a vernal pool. I wonder if the mixture of beer and groundwater made the spring peepers as happy as the students were during the midnight hours of their final fling.