

High and Dry

(Sung-Min Kim/The Diamondback, and Jon Banister, Senior Staff Writer)

October 24, 2014 - When Dede Goldsmith's daughter, Mary Shelley Goldsmith, texted her about going to a Dada Life concert at Echostage in August 2013, she thought nothing of it. Her daughter wasn't the type to get into drugs, she thought. She must just be going to dance with friends.

Later that night, after taking pure MDMA, also known as molly, Shelley overheated and suffered a cardiac arrest. She wouldn't make it back to her University of Virginia campus. She was pronounced dead at 3 a.m. at Providence Hospital, *The Washington Post* reported.

On Aug. 1, Tyler Viscardi, a student at this university, died of a suspected drug overdose at the Mad Decent Block Party at Merriweather Post Pavilion in Columbia after consuming a drink spiked with a toxic substance, authorities said.

These kinds of cases have historically led people to cast a dim light on drug users and the rave scene. But an upcoming research paper, which will be released in the American Sociological Association's quarterly magazine *Contexts* in November, details how a 2003 law intended to fix the problem did the opposite, making raves substantially more dangerous for experimenting young adults.

The RAVE Act, introduced by then-Sen. Joe Biden (D-Del.), "places young ravers at great risk of harm" by discouraging venues from providing safety measures for fear of being accused of knowingly allowing drug use, which incurs a hefty fine, according to the paper.

"They could provide more medical services. They could provide free water ... or even some level of drug education," said Tammy Anderson, the University of Delaware professor who wrote the paper after years of researching the rave scene. "If they did all that, it would be self-incriminating because the way the RAVE Acts reads is, a promoter can be held responsible if they know the drug is happening at the event and they allow it to happen."

MDMA is most common among the 18- to 25-year-old age group, and 12.8 percent of young adults have admitted to taking the drug at least once in their lifetime, according to a 2013 National Institute on Drug Abuse survey.

Ravers told The Diamondback they take molly for the sense of euphoria and ability to dance all night, but Anderson said it also can cause users' body temperature to spike. When combined with a packed crowd and prolonged dancing without water access, the consequences can be deadly.

Sophomore history major Matt Mitzel went to Echostage for a Barstool Blackout Tour rave during his freshman year, and while he said he did not take drugs, he remembers feeling overheated with no water available.

“I was dying of heat, dehydrated,” Mitzel said. “I asked [for water], and they said they couldn’t give it to me. They said they could give me ice. I don’t think there was water anywhere, I really don’t.”

Echostage did not respond to requests for comment.

Mikayla Hellwich, a media relations associate for Law Enforcement Against Prohibition, said venues have a responsibility to provide water for attendees.

“Any barrier that anyone places on anyone’s access to water is a human rights issue,” said Hellwich, a former president of this university’s chapter of Students for Sensible Drug Policy. “There are places ... that charge you for a bottle of water. They only give you a small bottle, and bartenders won’t pour you a free cup. That’s a huge problem, even if you’re not drinking or doing drugs.”

Hellwich spoke at an SSDP conference last month alongside Goldsmith about potential problems the RAVE Act causes.

Since her daughter’s death, Goldsmith has been a leading advocate for change. She started a campaign called “Amend the RAVE Act,” which aims to change the wording of the law to “take away any impediment to common sense public safety measures.”

Goldsmith said she met with a U.S. senator last week — whom she declined to name — and is confident she can create meaningful change. Goldsmith said she is working on this issue because she needs to “find purpose in Shelley’s death.”

While Goldsmith’s daughter died after an indoor rave at Echostage, this problem has begun to appear at outdoor venues, specifically at Merriweather.

Two people died and 20 more were hospitalized at Merriweather’s Mad Decent Block Party in August. Viscardi, 20, from Greenville, North Carolina, was at the concert with friends when he unknowingly drank water spiked with drugs, his mother said in a statement following his death. After showing “concerning behavior,” he was rushed to Howard County General Hospital, where he was later pronounced dead.

Merriweather operator Seth Hurwitz released a statement following the incident: “This drug epidemic is no longer confined to specific demographics, or time of day, or geography, or lifestyle,” the statement read. “It’s just everywhere and, and unfortunately, this generation of teens and 20-somethings has not learned this lesson yet. It’s just heartbreaking. This particular type of incident is not the problem of those who should have known better...it’s the problem of those too young to believe it could happen to them. Sadly we find ourselves in the classic position of trying to tell kids not to do something they think is fun.”

“They could provide free water ... or even some level of drug education.” - Tammy Anderson, University of Delaware professor

Roya Babaturk, a sophomore kinesiology major, has been working at Merriweather for four years as a vendor. She said the venue has two water fountains on opposite sides of the 40-acre lot, and water costs \$4 throughout the venue. “There are going to be long lines for those two water fountains. If there’s thousands of people, they’re just going to choose not to drink water,” she said. “Venues do need to have accessible water whether it’s filling stations or just a hose. A couple of those around the venue, [and] I think you’ll see less of those hospitalizations.”

Babaturk said Moonrise Festival at Pimlico Race Course in Baltimore was a model for how venues should provide water. She remembers seeing water stations throughout the area, misting tents and paramedic tents, steps she would like to see Merriweather take. “Over the summer, I’ll see a couple times where people will be walking across the lawn next to my food stand, and you’ll see someone faint,” she said. “It’s pretty scary, but it’s probably because they just didn’t have water.”

Freshman mechanical engineering major Austin Ortel has frequented raves since high school. At Camp Bisco in New York last year, his friend passed out during Bassnectar’s performance and was carried to the medical tent on a stretcher. Ortel said free water would have improved the situation, but he also suggested drug testing kits. Kits would allow users to make sure what they are taking is not laced with a more dangerous substance, though Ortel said he doubts venues would consider this.

“It would seem like you’re condoning drugs a lot more as a venue,” Ortel said. “But in the end, people being able to test the molly that they’re getting and realize it’s bath salts could save a life - and that definitely happens a lot.”

Anderson’s research paper tells the story of Jeffrey Russ, who died at Electric Zoo in New York City in 2013 from MDMA and methylone intoxication and hyperthermia. She said a testing kit might have saved his life, but that with the way the RAVE Act is interpreted, providing these kits would put promoters at “even greater legal risk.”

“The RAVE Act discourages rave promoters and production companies from taking the precautions needed to protect their customers,” according to the paper. “Party promoters walk a fine line between steering clear of the law and putting on a safe and profitable event.”

The rave scene has changed drastically since the law passed in 2003. With the rising popularity of electronic dance music, 100,000-person rave festivals are taking place that ravers a decade ago would have balked at, Anderson said.

“Raves were smaller in scale; they weren’t corporate events; they weren’t commercialized like they are now; and they weren’t done within the legitimate nighttime economy,” she said. “They were underground, grassroots and they didn’t have to abide by laws, so if they wanted to have a drug testing group come out and test people’s drugs, they didn’t worry about liability.”

Anderson said the emergence of raves in mainstream culture also has brought increased attention to medical emergencies that previously would have gone relatively unnoticed. But she stressed that emergencies still happen in a very small number of cases.

“People are going to do drugs no matter what — it’s inevitable, especially in the music scene.” - Austin Ortel, freshman mechanical engineering major

“Most of the people who go to these events go and have a good time and go home and go to sleep and get on with their lives,” she said. “It’s very unfortunate that people die or go to hospitals ... but the vast majority are able to go and have a good time and enjoy that.”

Justin, a sophomore business administration major at Towson University, said drugs are “everywhere” at today’s raves, and they can be safe as long as users know “who they’re getting it from and what they’re getting.” But Justin, whose last name has been withheld because he admits to drug use, remembers the one bad experience he had at a concert.

Justin was seeing Reblution at Pier Six Pavilion in Baltimore in June, and he was on LSD. He remembers one of his friends coming and grabbing him around his neck while he was dancing. But he didn’t recognize who it was, and it “spooked” him, causing him to push his friend. When the rest of his group started to walk an agitated Justin to the exit to cool down, they were approached by a security officer. “Once security came, they freaked me out a lot more, so I started trying to get away and they restrained me,” he said.

When Justin attempted to flee, two security guards tackled him and pinned him to the ground, causing him to panic. He said officers gave him a sedative to calm him down, but it made him black out. The next thing he remembers is waking up in the hospital.

He said he felt fine when his friends were calmly speaking to him, but the appearance of the aggressive officers was too much to handle.

“They didn’t know what was going on, so they handled it as if I was drunk and incoherent,” he said. “People on LSD are not going to go around fighting people. If they would have known that, they could have easily talked me out of it instead of having to use force and restrain me.”

“I don’t think there was water anywhere, I really don’t.” - Matt Mitzel, sophomore history major

In the NIH survey, 6.5 percent of people aged 18-25 said they have taken LSD in their lifetime. About 11 percent of those older than 26 reported taking the drug sometime in their life.

Babaturk said Merriweather and other local concert venues do pat-downs for everyone who enters, but every student interviewed for this article agreed it is impossible for security to put a stop to drug use at concerts. They noted methods such as taping drugs to the inside of the leg, hiding them in a bra, wallet or shoe, and ingesting the drug before entering the venue.

“The law should be trying to keep them safe,” Ortel said. “People are going to do drugs no matter what — it’s inevitable, especially in the music scene. You can try to eliminate that as much as you want, but people are going to be doing drugs, and that’s just how it’s going to work.”

Justin said security should focus on finding attendees who bring in large quantities to sell, as it is far more dangerous to buy drugs from a stranger at a concert than to bring a small quantity the user knows is pure.

Anderson hopes that when the paper is published in November, it will raise awareness of this growing issue.

“It’s time to amend the RAVE Act if we’re not going to get rid of it altogether,” Anderson said, citing Goldsmith’s efforts to create medical exemptions in the law. “That would be a great step.”

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