

# LIFE OF THE PARTY

## How stress and academic pressure to perform lead to a warped attitude toward pregame drinking

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**K**acey Chapman ('23) first suspected something was wrong just before midnight on Oct. 28. The Rice University freshman had spent weeks looking forward to the school's notorious Night of Decadence – a university-wide party, or “public” as they are colloquially known around campus, where the dress code entails wearing as little clothing as one feels comfortable. Chapman arrived at the party expecting to see all manner of debauchery, but what she didn't anticipate was the event getting shut down with several of her peers either hospitalized or in handcuffs.

In the weeks leading up to Night of Decadence, Wiess College, one of Rice's 11 residential colleges, had “NOD” spelled out in lights in their quad. All around campus students were bombarded with silly posters decorated with eggplant emojis or quotes from the Barbie movie, all communicating one message: This was not a party to be missed.

When the tickets became available online, so many users flooded the registration form that the website almost crashed, and those who didn't immediately RSVP were unlikely to get a ticket. Yet even students who had not secured a spot couldn't resist indulging in gossip about the upcoming party or helping others pick out their wardrobe – or lack thereof – in the days beforehand.

Since its inception in 1972, Night of Decadence has not struggled to drum up attention, excitement and, every once in a while, controversy.

“NOD is the most anticipated public of the year,” Chapman said. “It's a totally sex-driven, sex-inspired event. And of course, people thinking about that and wearing next to nothing is going to lead to them consuming an abnormal amount of alcohol.”

In 2012, almost a dozen students were hospitalized with alcohol poisoning the night of the popular Halloween party. In response, Rice tightened its restrictions on hard alcohol and the number of people allowed at publics. More than a decade later, excessive alcohol remains an issue.

Even though prohibiting alcohol at NOD was intended to curtail drinking, the unintended consequence is that students tend to drink excessively before the party, which is one reason why over two dozen students required on-site

medical treatment this year due to overconsumption of alcohol. Seven students were hospitalized. Although no arrests were made, six students were handcuffed and sent to Rice's Student Judicial Programs for conduct violations.

Rice shut down NOD after a few hours because school and city medical resources were “becoming completely overwhelmed.” According to the Rice student newspaper, the Thresher, Wiess Chief Justice Renzo Espinoza told students in an email that “any more stress on the campus and the city resources would have put us in a very bad position.”

The next morning, countless bottles of hard liquor, defined as any beverage containing over 40% alcohol by volume, were littered around Wiess.

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**TIM RYAN,  
PREVENTION SPECIALIST**

Some Rice administrators cite pregameing as a factor contributing to the NOD shutdown. Students consumed excessive amounts of hard alcohol prior to the event, enough to last them through the night.

“There have been issues at each public party this semester around pre-gaming before the event, uncivil behavior in the lines, and disrespectful attitudes toward volunteers, caregivers, and other staff working at the events,” Rice's Dean of Undergraduate Admissions Bridget Gorman wrote to students in an email, obtained by Houston Public Media. “This cannot be tolerated.”

Rice is reviewing its alcohol policy for undergraduates and canceled all public campus parties until after spring break.

“I understand why the school reacted the way they did. It was such an extreme situation,” said Brandon Lozano ('23), another Rice freshman. “However, I do have this feeling that once underclassmen are allowed to go back to publics, there will be a large burst of students going all-out for those events, which could lead to something where many people go overboard again.”

### THE PROCESS

**A**bout one Saturday a month, Iris heads to a nearby gas station. She's on good terms with the 50-something cashier (he always tells her that she looks pretty), so when she approaches the counter with a 10-pack of Fireball cinnamon whiskey shooters, he never asks for an ID. Sometimes, he even throws in a couple extra, free of charge.

And so begins the pregameing process for the high school student. After that, Iris heads back home to do her makeup and maybe straighten her hair before going to a friend's house around 4 p.m. She and her friends take inventory of the drinks they've collectively procured, either with fake IDs or parental assistance. Inevitably, there is never quite enough, so someone will head to a nearby gas station or back to their house and scavenge for more.

Iris's goal is always to “get drunk enough that I'm really drunk, but not so drunk that I throw up.”

For Iris, and many of her peers, pregameing is essential to achieving this delicate balance.

Jessie, a self-described chronic overthinker, never arrives at a party sober. In an environment meant for carefree fun, she prefers to leave her usual inhibitions at home. She

drinks before and during every house party she attends, about once a month.

Jessie is still figuring out how to manage the unpredictable effects of pregameing. One weekend earlier this year, she drank shot after shot of vodka, underestimating the toll it would take. Since it was a more expensive brand, she had been told it would have less of an effect, so she figured it would even out if she drank more. She quickly became “very far gone.”

“If I had taken it slower, I wouldn't have gotten myself in that situation.”

Tim Ryan, a lead prevention specialist at Pathways for Prevention, which aims to educate students about substance use and abuse, is visiting the Upper School later this month. He identifies pregameing as a unique type of drinking.

“Pregaming typically means you're getting drunk, and then at the party you're getting even drunker, which means we're probably engaging with someone who is binge-drinking.”

Iris cites the fear of not being intoxicated enough as the main reason why she ends up drinking too much. A few months ago, she split a bottle of tequila four ways with some friends before a party, the first one that had been thrown in several months. She doesn't remember much about that night, but she has not been able to drink tequila ever since.

In an effort to curb her social drinking habits, Iris occasionally volunteers to be the designated driver. She used to drive others frequently, but lately she is reluctant to do so.

“It's just not fun unless you're drinking,” she said. “When you're sober, you're just annoyed that you're surrounded by drunk people.”

Jessie has been chided for her drinking habits, even by her closest friends.

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**“LIAM”**

“It comes from a place of love, but it feels very judgmental because I think they take on a superiority complex about it, almost as if being a nondrinker is a badge of honor,” Jessie said. “The hardcore drinkers see it the other way around: getting wasted and blackout drunk is a badge of honor that they have that nondrinkers don't. It's just toxic all around.”

Data from a 2021 survey of St. John's students conducted by the Freedom from Chemical Dependency Foundation reports that 48% of 10th through 12th graders typically do not drink alcohol, 65% either do not drink at all or typically drink only once or twice a year. And 79% of those students either do not drink at all or drink once a month or less.

Since her arrival in 2018, Upper School counselor Ashley Le Grange has partnered with FCD and Pathways for Prevention to collect this data and meaningfully communicate it to the student body in yearly information sessions. She

*Editor's note: Some names have been changed to protect privacy. Sources who are referred to by only one name have asked to remain anonymous.*



pared to capitalize on the rare opportunity to shake things up that parties offer. She concedes that she’s more likely to say the things that will enliven her social life if she’s under the influence – and it’s an insurance policy in case she says something she later regrets.

Liam says this mindset is a byproduct of an environment that requires students to give the stereotypical 110% every day of the week. The constant grind leads students to feel stagnant and socially restrained. Parties are the panacea for the all-consuming monotony of academics, and so there is a pressure to make the most of them.

“People get nervous about something that, when you think about it, is so dumb,” he said. “You’re standing around with your friends in someone’s backyard. That’s not an event you need to be hyped up or nervous for.”

Based on survey data, SJS has a higher rate of pressure related to performance than it does generalized anxiety. The way many students alleviate this stress is through the use of substances.

“Maybe if St. John’s kids had some mountains around, they’d go for a hike one weekend instead piddling around at a party in West U,” Liam said.

Even so, Iris and Liam agreed that alcohol use at SJS is mild compared to the behavior they have observed or heard of at peer institutions like Kinkaid and Episcopal.

Dakota usually wakes up the morning after a party “feeling like a sinner.” Like many of her peers, she cannot avoid the guilt associated with drinking, and she does not want to exist in an environment where intoxication feels like a prerequisite to connection.

Le Grange is likewise worried about the long-term ramifications of linking alcohol with sociability. She says that by drinking at all parties, students are telling their bodies and brains that they need to use substances in order to get through the night without being uncomfortable. For developmental purposes, the adolescent brain needs to do that on its own, without chemicals, before they’re introduced into the equation.

“The repercussions are scary,” Dakota said. “But right now it just feels like a part of high school. I don’t know if it’s a part I’m willing to miss out on.”

thinks it’s important to note the discrepancy between the real statistics and the typical assumption that a majority of high school students are regular drinkers.

“When I think everyone is doing it, that’s when I’m more likely to participate,” she said. “But when I think there’s a risk associated, I’m less likely to participate.”

Le Grange disagrees with the common sentiment that high school kids must “learn how to drink” before they go to college, citing statistics that indicate a direct correlation between the age one starts drinking and the risk of alcoholism later in life.

Liam never drank in high school. He was still social and regularly attended parties, but he just didn’t like the idea of putting himself in a potentially embarrassing position.

Now in college, Liam has begun indulging in a few beers before he heads out. He feels like he wouldn’t be “sucking the marrow out of life” if he opted for an entirely sober college existence. Nevertheless, he has strong boundaries in place – only on Saturdays, and never have a headache in the morning.

“If I realize the next day that I did something out of my control, that’s a signal that I need to take a break for a while.”

But Liam doesn’t think the few drinks he partakes in once a week have that much of an effect. Mostly, he feels a bit more relaxed and inclined to be open with new acquaintances. When it comes to hanging out with people he knows and cares about, he considers himself at his best when sober.

Jessie likens drinking to conditioning.

“I think of it like running. You can go running without running shoes, but it’s way better when you have them,” Jessie said. “That’s like a party, you can go to a party without drinking, but for me at least, it enhances everything.”

## THE PHILOSOPHY

One reason Liam never drank in high school was that he didn’t subscribe to the usual philosophy of high school parties – he never saw them as an exciting opportunity for new developments in his social life. For him, it was just hanging out at someone’s house for a few hours. But he felt alone in this mentality.

“Amongst the people who can’t bring themselves out of their shells enough to start serious things while sober, they use that once-a-month excuse to put all the chips on the table,” he said.

Iris regrets her growing reluctance to attend a party without drinking first. But without pregaming, she feels ill-pre-

## THE NUMBERS

95%

Students who have never used substances before a school event

43%

Students who have never had a drink

69%

Students who typically do not drink

89%

Students who do not drink or drink once a month

88%

Students who think SJS culture does not pressure people to drink

76%

Students who say their parents do not permit them to drink

*Data from 2021 Freedom From Chemical Dependency survey given to all Upper School students*