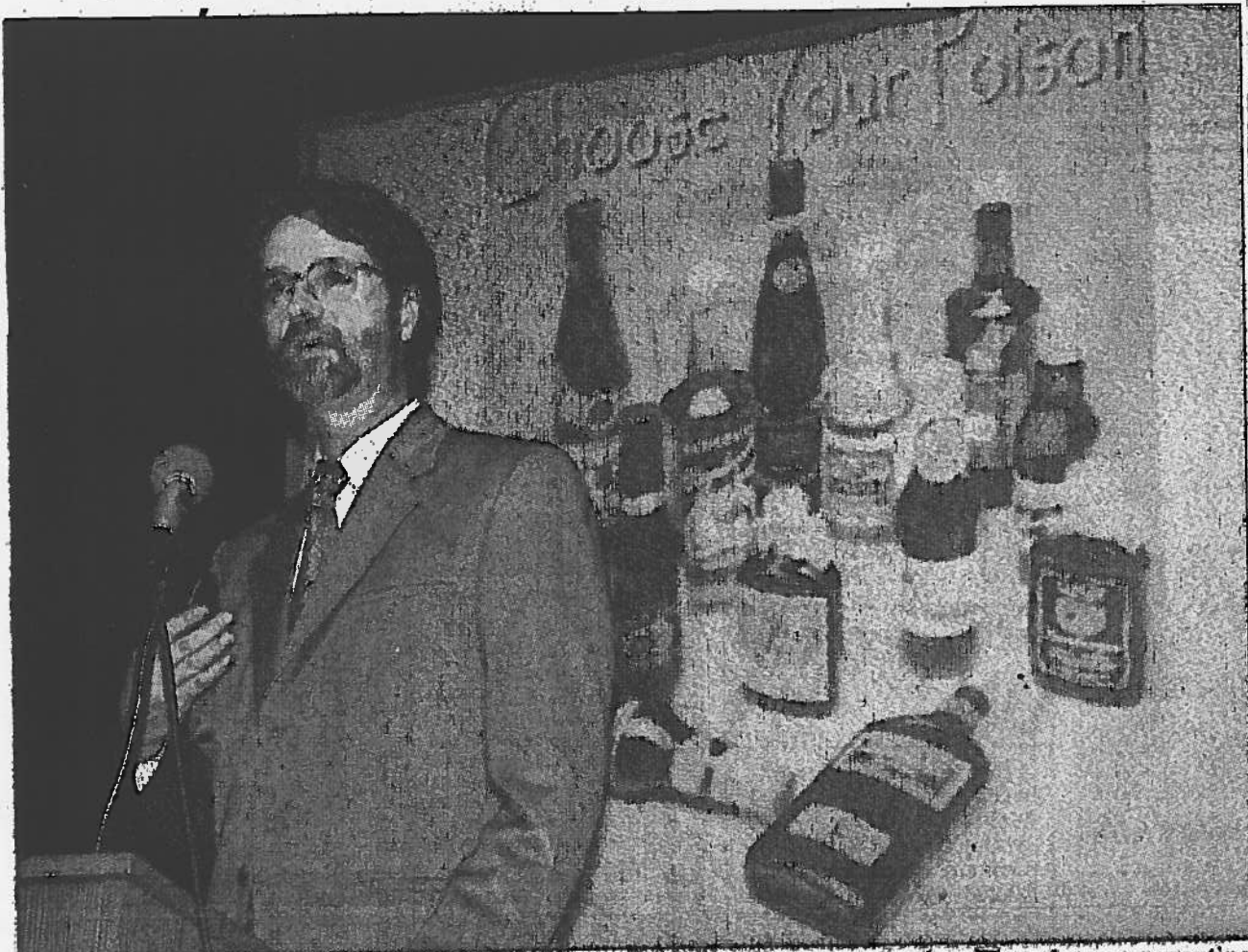


'Social Norms 101'



Wesley Perkins addresses a workshop at the Saranac Lake High School auditorium Thursday on preventing substance abuse and promoting healthy school environments. Here, Perkins addresses the issue of false messages given by some advertisements. Although some people's bodies react to alcohol as a poison, most do not. Additionally, youth sometimes observe adults consuming alcohol, yet do not see them reacting as though they have been poisoned.

(Enterprise photo — Michele Buck)

Perkins advocates focusing on the positive

By ED FORBES

Enterprise Staff Writer

SARANAC LAKE — H. Wesley Perkins, professor of sociology at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, spoke to district educators on Thursday evening regarding student misperceptions about drug and alcohol abuse.

Saranac Lake High School was the final

stop of Perkins' three-part tour of the area which also included visits to North Star Industries and North Country Community College. The Saranac Lake Central School District invited Perkins to speak in order to initiate adistrict-wide discussion on drug and alcohol abuse prevention.

A nationally respected researcher, Perkins focuses his work on what he sees as

deep misperceptions by parents, teachers and students regarding the realities of drug and alcohol use by young people. Most people in these groups, Perkins said, tend to inflate problems and in turn, students succumb to peer pressure caused by the misperception. Consequently, abuse increases.

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Perkins outlined the causes of these misperceptions, firmly believing that they are rooted in psychological understanding. He believes students are deeply influenced by an admittedly vocal minority who use and abuse illegal substances. These influences are perpetuated by the media and advertising industry, Perkins said, and the minority becomes perceived as the majority.

The consequences of these misperceptions among students are what Perkins calls "the reign of error."

"Because students believe that

use is typical, actual use and abuse rise," Perkins said.

"This is the ultimate dilemma of the misperception problem, perpetuating and extending it."

Most important to Perkins' presentation and best received by the audience of Saranac Lake educators were the suggested prevention strategies. Perkins has initiated a variety of campaigns elsewhere to provide the truth about substance abuse. Perkins believes that too much attention is given to the minority of students who use illegal substances and that instead, "something very basic should be done."

"We should be telling the stu-

dents about the majority who are not users based on credible, collected data," Perkins said.

Calling statistics that show that the majority of students are not irresponsible about drugs and alcohol "norms," Perkins advocates focusing on the "positive truth."

"If we tell the students the truth that most are not users or abusers, they will act more positively," he stated.

The truth will defeat misperceptions, and over time, behavior will change for the better, Perkins said.

To get these statistics about the majority and the positive truth to students in a creative way, Perkins

suggested several strategies. Print-media campaigns, which involve advertisement in publications and posters, can demonstrate and present statistics in creatively. Perkins also suggested electronic media campaigns, including computer screen savers and e-mail. Curriculum infusion to bring positive statistics into the classroom through normal coursework, was Perkins' final suggestion.

Perkins encouraged experimentation and creativity in presenting statistics.

"Constantly provide data about the majority, and you will erode misperceptions about use," he said.