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Life

Play it safe on spring break

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Clarkston physician James O'Neill recalled the time five years ago when he treated a 19-year-old Kalamazoo College student who had been raped on her spring break trip in Mexico.

"She was devastated," O'Neill said. "She missed the rest of the semester at college."

O'Neill was reflecting on spring break trips after the FBI announced Monday that an Eastpointe 16-year-old missing in Cancun, Mexico, since last Thursday was found safe Monday.

The Eastpointe teen, Amy Vargas, was found uninjured, the FBI said. Special Agent Sandra Berchtold said the girl would be back in Michigan soon.

The story brought back the nightmare in 2005 when 18-year-old Natalee Holloway from Alabama disappeared from the Caribbean island Aruba while on her high school spring break. Her body has never been found.

Spring break starts in many schools this month. Oakland University has a winter recess beginning Feb. 22.

As for the teenager O'Neill treated, he said the girl was with a group that had been drinking "out of control."

He described how students in such condition are watched by men.

"The girls were preyed upon," he said. "The men then separated them and got them away from the group."

His patient had then been raped. He had to take blood samples to see if she had any sexually transmitted diseases from the incident.

"What a horrible thing to happen to her and her family," he said. "What a hell of a trauma to go through."

The U.S. State Department reports 100,000 U.S. students go on spring break, according to its Web site, www.state.gov.

Drunkness can lead to "serious problems with Mexican authorities," according to the State Department. "Alcohol is involved in the vast majority of arrests, accidents, violent crimes, rapes and deaths suffered by American students on spring break. Individuals 16 years of age or older are tried as adults."

While O'Neill stressed a chaperone is a must, it is known that students are tempted to venture out on their own.

"Stay together," he said.

Set up times when the group can come back together.

Watch your drinks, he said.

"Never leave a drink sitting around because somebody might put something into it," he said.

Don't hitchhike or take transportation that may not be professional.

The State Department warns people to use only licensed, regulated "sitio" (pronounced SEE-tee-oh) taxis.

Some illegitimate taxi drivers are, in fact, criminals in search of victims and users of those taxis have been robbed, kidnapped or raped. Authorities said hotels, clubs and restaurants will summon a sitio taxi upon request.

O'Neill said "birds of prey" criminals are watching.

"They're looking to get money, sex, anything they can," he said.

Keep in touch with friends and family by cell phone, said O'Neill. "Stay within your finances and watch handing out your credit card," he said. If a credit card is stolen or lost, cancel it.

O'Neill, who has traveled to Mexico and other vacation areas outside the U.S., instructs traveling students to "represent your country well. Be courteous and polite. Tip the people who serve you. That's their living."

Spring breakers should take a health kit including Tylenol, sunscreen, Pepto Bismol, Band-Aids, antibiotic cream and even a bandage, said O'Neill.

He warned people to stay hydrated. People who need to see medical help should go to clinics. "Hotel staff will (recommend) where to go," he said.

The government warns swimmers to also beware of hazards, noting that warning flags on beaches should be taken seriously. Black or red flags mean people should not enter the water.

Strong undertows and rough surf are common along Mexican beaches, especially on the Pacific coast, and drownings have occurred when swimmers have been overwhelmed by conditions.

O'Neill recommended students consider seeing Mexico by going with a church group.

"Do something constructive and spiritual," he recommended.

"Try reading and studying things you would never get in school here. You can help others and also have a good time."

Photocopy that passport

Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard suggested travelers choose a destination where they will feel safe and know where they can get help in any situation.

"Parents should have a real conversation with their children about what they're be doing and about going to remote locations," he said.

Whether students are girls or guys, "Never take a drink from someone you don't know," Bouchard said.

"People have been known to put drugs into drinks," Bouchard said. "Be very cautious about what you are eating drinking and has control over that.

"Let common sense rule," he said. "If you are going to be acting differently than you would in your own town, there is good reason not to."

Bouchard suggests having emergency contact points and checking in periodically with family and friends.

"Copy your passport and keep it in a separate location so in case it is stolen, you will have a starting point with an embassy," he said.

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