



Top, \$36, Earrings, \$20 ; Hemline, 251.287.6875. Pants, \$72, Bracelet, \$18. Apricot Lane, 251.725.0844

VIRGINIA'S VENTURE

If you've ever met the Executive Director of Alabama's Drug Education Council (DEC), Virginia Foxworth Guy, you know she's calm, cool, and collected. Incredibly kind and an undeniable force at the same time, she's a woman on a mission who will stop at nothing to ensure the DEC makes as big of an impact as humanly possible on addiction and all the issues that surround it — including the law. Armed with facts like more than 2.5 million middle and high school students vape every single day, she's seeking real change locally and nationally. And, she's just the "Guy" to do it. On a prime-time journey that puts the Bay area on center-stage, she shares the staggering facts we all need to know and more.

BY Hayley Hill **PHOTOS** Stevie Photography, SteviePhotography.com

HAIR Felisha Allen, HeadDress Salon, 251.689.7427

MAKEUP Courtney Matthews Makeup Artistry, Cocokatig78@gmail.com

Having recently attended the annual DEC luncheon, I was amazed by the packed room. Filled with the Bay's most impressive and philanthropic people, it was a heart-felt reminder of how most everyone's life has been impacted by addiction. Even Mobile's Mayor, Sandy Stimpson, shared words of hope that many are still talking about. Interestingly, this luncheon is the only fundraiser the DEC hosts annually which makes it that much more important and proves that when a community comes together, real impact and change can be made.

If you've raised children in the area, chances are at one point your children came home full of excitement after experiencing the DeBakey drug education vehicle. I can easily recall my kids bouncing through the door telling me all about the "drunk" goggles they tried on and how dumb drinking was. Operated in partnership with Mobile Infirmery Medical Systems, this traveling learning laboratory utilizes interactive technology and features an experienced facilitator to teach students about the harmful consequences of substance abuse. Talk about a win-win!

Regarding the DEC mission, Virginia shares, "The vision of the DEC is to promote healthy choices to impact the hearts and minds of individuals and families and to change the community narrative about substance use disorder and addiction. Certified in Alabama, we have offices in Mobile and Baldwin counties and provide services in Baldwin, Clarke, Conecuh, Escambia, Mobile, Monroe, and Washington Counties. Each program and practice are based on a set of core beliefs that every one of us is important and deserves to be nurtured and has a responsibility to promote healthy choices, and that the abuse of alcohol and drugs is preventable, addiction is treatable, and recovery happens," Virginia tells us.

Since most of us are aware of how deep addiction runs both locally and nationally, Virginia has a big job. Known for her laser-like focus, and for sprinting around in heels, her history is as interesting as her work. Born in Kingsport, TN, Virginia's family relocated when she was just 3 years old when her father,

a Presbyterian minister, was called to serve in Mobile. Inquiring about her calling and how addiction impacted her life, her response was anything but typical. "Recovery has impacted my life far more than active addiction. My father, Reverend Watson Guy, was in long-term recovery before he met my mother. So, I had an incredible example. I grew up being taught about the principles of recovery long before I was ever exposed to anyone in active addiction. This is unique as it was very unusual in those days for a minister to speak openly about their recovery. Of course, through my work, I now deal with addiction and recovery daily."

Starting to connect the dots, Virginia shares the history of the DEC. "The agency was formed as a residential home for alcoholics through Mobile's ministry of the Council of Downtown Churches in the late 60s. Their goal was to provide treatment, recovery, and rehabilitation to those who had fallen victim to alcohol. My father was the first Director of the agency. During my college internship with the agency, I fell in love with the mission and the people we served. The rest is history!" So, yes, this has been her one and only job.

Asking what people might be surprised, or even shocked, to learn about drugs and alcohol, Virginia is quick to respond, "We are keenly aware that 90% of addiction begins in the teenage years. This is when the developing brain is very vulnerable to being negatively impacted since the brain is not fully developed until the early 20s. The longer we can delay the onset of alcohol and drug use, the better chance a person has of not developing addiction and for being able to have a normal relationship with alcohol and drugs for the remainder of their lives."

As to why the DEC is so important to this community, Virginia shares, "Substance use disorder and addiction are a significant factor in almost every other social issue. If we can reduce alcohol and drug misuse, we can significantly reduce health care costs, insurance rates, crime and incarceration, family violence, child abuse and neglect, low educational attainment, unemployment, and more. Not to mention the pain and suffering families experience because of a loved one's addiction."

Top, \$310; The Mix, 251.298.9137; Pant, \$63; Apricot Lane, 251.725.0644; Earrings, \$32; Bangle, \$95; The Holiday, 251.432.4911.



Getting specific about our youth, Virginia adds, “Parents really need to know that this is the most dangerous time for drug use I’ve ever seen. With the proliferation of fentanyl across our nation, all drugs bought online, from a friend, or on the street could be tainted with a lethal dose of this deadly drug. Sadly, ‘just one pill *can* kill.’ Plus, we are at an all-time high for serious mental health issues, especially among our youth. Drugs interfere with the normal production of serotonin and dopamine in the brain and have been shown to disrupt mood and attention in adolescents. With so many adolescents already struggling, drug use is making a difficult mental health crisis far worse.”

Standing firm in her belief that It’s never too early to talk with your children about making healthy choices, the DEC offers a lot of help. “We have age-appropriate materials to help parents start the conversations, and we are available to consult with families about their individual needs. Our main message to parents is, ‘Talk early. Talk often. They hear you.’” A tremendous resource, they offer free, anonymous drug screenings for juveniles at their offices, and no personal identifiers are collected. The Chemical Abuse Prevention Program (CAPP) is another available resource where families gain insight in areas essential to positive youth and family development. They also offer a variety of workshop and training opportunities that parents can easily sign up for on their website.

However, underage vaping, a full-blown national crisis, is what’s keeping Virginia and her team up at night. Believe it or not, our children are able to not only buy vapes through social media, but they can also purchase them in local shops. And some parents even give their children vaping materials. PSA alert: nicotine in any form is an addictive drug. “The youth vaping crisis scares me for the most vulnerable in our community — our children. Starting a few years ago with teenagers, now children as young as 8 or 9 years old are experimenting with these dangerous devices. Vapes can contain nicotine, THC, or even fentanyl. Even worse, are the chemicals. When inhaled, they can cause permanent lung damage as they are the only organs that do not repair themselves. I am saddened that a young child could end up with lung damage for a lifetime. To protect our children, we must criminalize these devices for our underage folks!”

And the numbers don’t lie. In fact, they are shocking. More than

a million teens started vaping between 2017 and 2019. A survey of 20,000 people shows that 75.4% of them are between the ages of 14 and 17. The popularity of Juul and other vaping cartridges targeted at children in flavors like bubble gum, gummy bears, cotton candy, and Fruit Loops are fueling a market valued at \$22.4 billion in 2022 and expected to grow to \$182.8 billion by 2030.

More than 1 in 4 high school students say they vape every single day and nearly 1 in 5 students in the 8th, 10th and 12th grades have vaped marijuana. With inconceivable funding, the tobacco/vaping industry is even targeting our elementary school students— children 7- and 8-years-old are already vaping. Sadly, the FDA is overwhelmed. They simply cannot keep up with the rapidly evolving tactics and new products being introduced to the market — along with loopholes that allow manufacturers and sellers to evade regulations as fast as they are enacted.

Plus, neither school officials nor law enforcement have the adequate resources to discipline youth offenders. This has resulted in inconsistent consequences leading to highly addicted children who can become both distracted and disruptive in the classroom. And given the fact that the tobacco industry is heavily invested in the vaping industry, giving it the resources needed to evolve and evade regulators, vape products are heavily marketed to youth through brand ambassadors, partnerships, and other campaigns on social media. With more than 15,000 flavors currently on the market, 85% of teens vape because they enjoy the taste. Some products with CBD and Delta-8 can even be purchased legally by minors.

And the health consequences cannot be emphasized enough. Doctors are reporting serious health issues like lung disease in teens caused by vaping as they contain the harmful chemicals found in cleaning products, nail polish remover, weed killer, and bug spray, as well as toxins like formaldehyde, lead, and aluminum. Because vaping devices deliver much higher concentrations than smoking a cigarette, the nicotine in one vape cartridge is equivalent to 20 cigarettes. Vaping THC is increasingly becoming the norm and levels of THC delivered by a vaping device can be as much as 16 times higher than found in a joint.

After consulting with physicians, behavioral scientists, counselors, educators, legislators, and law enforcement officials, Virginia and her

— UNDERAGE VAPING CRISIS FAST FACTS: —

MORE THAN A MILLION TEENS STARTED VAPING BETWEEN 2017 AND 2019.
75.4% OF THEM ARE BETWEEN THE **AGES OF 14 AND 17**

THE POPULARITY OF JUUL AND OTHER VAPING CARTRIDGES **TARGETED AT CHILDREN** IN FLAVORS LIKE BUBBLE GUM, GUMMY BEARS, COTTON CANDY, AND FRUIT LOOPS ARE FUELING A MARKET VALUED AT \$22.4 BILLION IN 2022 AND EXPECTED TO GROW TO \$182.8 BILLION BY 2030.

MORE THAN 1 IN 4 HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS SAY THEY **VAPE EVERY SINGLE DAY** AND NEARLY 1 IN 5 STUDENTS IN THE 8TH, 10TH AND 12TH GRADES HAVE **VAPED MARIJUANA.**

CHILDREN 7 AND 8-YEARS-OLD ARE ALREADY VAPING.

A DEFENDER OF
MOBILE AND BALDWIN
COUNTIES YOUTH,
VIRGINIA GUY IS TAKING
A STAND. STAY
CONNECTED, FOLLOW
THE DRUG
EDUCATION COUNCIL
ON FACEBOOK
AND INSTAGRAM.



Top, \$50; Hemline, 251.287.6875. Pant, \$34.5; Blazer, \$450; The Mix, 251.298.9137. Earrings, Call For Price; Rise, 251.341.7096. Necklace, \$48; Apricot Lane, 251.725.0844.



Drug Education Council
 DrugEducation.org | TeenVapingCrisis.org

Mobile County
 3000 Television Avenue
 Mobile, 36606
 251.478.7855

Baldwin County
 22251 Palmer Street
 Robertsdale, 36567
 251.721.1451

team have quite literally sparked a movement that's quickly sweeping the state and nation.

For starters, Alabama State Senator Vivian Davis Figures recently introduced a bill that makes it unlawful for any individual under the age of 21 to purchase, use, possess, or transport any "electronic battery-powered device capable of being used to deliver any e-liquid, e-liquid substitute, tobacco, CBD oil, THC oil, herbal extract, nicotine salt, or any analog thereof, or any other substance to the individual through the inhalation of vapor..." The bill notes that "a violation is committed upon mere possession" of a vaping device, regardless of substance, if any, in the device. The bill received overwhelming bipartisan support and was co-sponsored by 100% of the state senators present.

Figures, a long-time healthcare advocate and successful author of the Alabama Clean Indoor Air Act, stated, "Alabama has one of the highest incidences of vaping in the nation, which leads to higher healthcare costs, a loss of productivity, and a higher morbidity. This bill is meant to keep vaping devices out of the hands of minors and to keep our youth healthy so they can make informed decisions about vaping at a more appropriate age."

A deeply involved and ecstatic Virginia adds, "This bill amends the law that prohibits the possession of tobacco by minors and is no different than the law prohibiting the possession of alcohol by minors. It will mean better health for our young people and our state overall," Virginia said. "I would urge everyone to contact their legislator and ask them to vote for this underage vaping bill. Let's make Alabama a leader in the effort to outlaw underage vaping!"

Also, HB 319, sponsored by Representative Barbara Drummond, was just approved by the House Judiciary Committee. "I want to make some things very clear on this bill," Drummond said. "This bill does not deal with adults vaping. It is simply for children who are 21 years old and under. This bill will make it illegal for retailers to sell all vaping products to youth who are under that age. It will also make it illegal to sell any vape product that is not in the directory that was established by this body in 2021."

While everything is moving in the right direction, Virginia still has quite the battle ahead and I must know how she does it all. "I try to take good care of myself. I strive to eat healthy, get plenty of sleep and exercise, spend time with friends, and most importantly, I pray! Plus, we live in the coolest place on earth! The beach is my "thin space" – it has so much of God's goodness," she humbly shares. Looking for a meaningful career moment, Virginia adds, "My heart is touched most deeply when I see young people overcoming incredible odds, making healthy choices, becoming leaders, and giving back to their community. Many of our youth are doing the right thing and being exceedingly courageous in standing up for their values. I continue to be in awe!"