

The Woman's Christian Temperance Union keeps up the fight

Social Studies

By **TIM LEHNERT** Providence Phoenix December 19, 2012

"We believe in total abstinence," says Carol Mitola, treasurer of the Rhode Island branch of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). That means no alcohol, period. No flute of champagne to toast the newlyweds, no rum in the fruitcake, no wine with communion. "Society seems to forget," says Mitola, "that when you drink you lose control."

In the 1920s, the Rhode Island WCTU counted around 3000 members. Today, there are a dozen or so faithful, and the organization is in search of officers, namely a president and a treasurer (Mitola is stepping down).



Mitola chalks up the flagging membership to the wrongheaded notion that the temperance movement is no longer required. "I don't think people today see the dangers of drinking," she says. It's hard to argue the point. I've met Mitola at a Warwick Dunkin' Donuts that shares its parking lot with the People's Liquor Warehouse. She cradles her small bottle of orange juice as we talk; business across the way is brisk.

A soft-spoken woman of 59, Mitola is the mother of three grown children, and lives with her husband in North Kingstown. She is a devout Christian, but her gray hair, turtleneck, quilted blue vest, and wire-rimmed glasses appear more hippie veteran than church lady.

The WCTU was founded in 1874. "Christian women were moved to action back then," says Mitola. "This was before welfare. Men who had a problem with alcohol would literally drink their paycheck away, leaving their families with nothing."

Prohibition, she maintains, was a success, despite its bad rap: "Domestic violence declined and society was better off." But the WCTU declined after its repeal.

I know the answer, but I have to ask anyway: Is moderate social drinking such a bad thing? What's wrong, after all, with a glass of wine with dinner, a beer or two while watching the game? "Sure, a lot of people drink and nothing happens," grants Mitola, a life-long abstainer, "but why risk it?" She refers me to the New Hampshire Public Television documentary "Just One Night," in which a successful businessman's seemingly innocuous beer with friends leads to a drunken spree that culminates in a jail sentence for vehicular manslaughter.

There are plenty of organizations, from AA to MADD, that seek to curb drinking, but few have the WCTU's singleness of purpose. MADD, says Mitola, "doesn't go far enough," in that it fails to advocate for total abstinence for youths and adults, whether behind the wheel or not. And while she applauds organizations that are helping recovering alcoholics and addicts, she is more interested in prevention than picking up the pieces.

To this end, the WCTU engages in outreach to schools and churches on the evils of alcohol, drugs and tobacco, and has sponsored abstinence essay and poster contests for students. She pressed on me a series of pamphlets produced by the WCTU's publishing arm on topics ranging from non-alcoholic punch recipes, to clarification of the role of wine in the bible, to "10 Reasons Why I Abstain."

The Ocean State's WCTU membership is small, but the organization is hanging in there. Last April, Governor Chafee proclaimed a "Youth Temperance Education Week," and in 2010 Rhode Island hosted the WCTU national convention at the Warwick Sheraton.

Care to join? Membership is open to women and men, but you have to take the pledge, and for many, that's no small beer: "I hereby solemnly promise, God helping me, to abstain from all distilled, fermented and malt liquors, including wine, beer and hard cider, and to employ all proper means to discourage the use of and traffic in the same."