

# Christian students set up dry tailgate party

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AUBURN, Ala. (RNS)—Setting up on the grassy area outside their dorm, grilling burgers and passing out drinks, the young men known as “College Kids Tailgate” are like scores of other [Auburn](#) students on game day—full of good cheer, camaraderie, and cries of “War Eagle!”

Their unofficial uniforms—orange jumpsuits—makes them visible, but so does the beverage they serve, a non-alcoholic cherry-flavored soda.

“Two or three of us are under 21, so (serving alcohol is) illegal,” said Auburn junior Michael Nunnely, one of the 15 organizers of the student-run group.

But age is hardly the only factor, he explained.

At their tailgate party on game day against West Virginia, Auburn students of College Kids Tailgate enjoy a “dry” party out of religious conviction. Tailgaters include (standing, left to right) Michael Nunnely, Garrett Cheney, Kyle Bumpous, Kevin Johnson, Brandon Campbell (feet in the air), Zack Carrol, Jordan Bellar, Ian Middleton, Luke Hasha and Michael Watford. Kneeling (from left) are Andrew Pearce and Ben Mahaffey. (RNS PHOTO/Courtesy of Kevin Johnson)

“As Christians we don’t need (alcohol) for a good time,” Nunnelly said. “There are people we know who would be uncomfortable around alcohol, so we decided not to have it. We expect our own lives to reflect our character. Being alcohol-free is only a small part of it.”

A larger part, Nunnelly explains, is fellowship provided by a welcoming—and intentionally nurturing—group. Nunnelly said the three years of sober tailgating has morphed into a “ministry opportunity.”

“We tried to get people to come who are churched, un-churched,” he said. “It’s not like we’re witnessing, doing street evangelism. But we’re hanging out, meeting people, having a good time.”

He hopes the good times “will spark into one-on-one relationships,” which might well give way to religious discussions afterwards.

“That’s the best way—getting to know somebody first,” he said.

Another one of the organizers, Kevin Johnson, knew Nunnelly from growing up in Birmingham.

“It has a lot to do with creating community,” said Johnson. “A lot of students don’t have anywhere to go on game day. We didn’t start out with a goal of things getting this big.”

Since the group formed with 15 students three years ago, it’s grown twenty-fold. The group now welcomes more than 300 revelers on game day, and that surge is no accident, said Johnson.

“It’s a lesson from God, how successful it’s been,” he said. “We made a decision from the beginning we didn’t want tailgate to be a place where we were preaching or passing things out. My whole view of evangelism is that it comes through relationships. If we were preaching on a Saturday, it would hit you in the face and bounce off.”

Students come from a variety of denominations, Johnson said, and all are welcome. And while hospitality and cherry soda never are in short supply, the tailgaters see the need for nothing stronger.

“My desire is to live my life in a way that glorifies God in every arena,” Johnson said. “It’s not going to involve alcohol. That’s a personal conviction that runs through the guys who run the tailgate.”