

ON THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

Group helps students stay clean and sober

By Sam Stockard

Marietta Daily Journal Staff Writer

Pope High School's drug and alcohol recovery support group is helping students readjust to school and deal with their addictions as they return to classrooms from rehabilitation centers.



Miriam Hanson



Deborah Peterson

Pope counselor Miriam Hanson and social worker Debbie Peterson have run the program the past three years and have published a book, "How To Conduct a School Recovery Support Group."

"We feel like it's something any school needs," Mrs. Hanson said. "Kids need it or they'll relapse or drop out."

Stacey, a Pope senior, said she started drinking with her parents when she was 7 or 8. Her favorite drugs were alcohol and marijuana, but she took amphetamines and barbiturates as well.

"There's nothing wonderful about coming back to school, except making good grades," Stacey said. (Students' names in this article have been changed to protect their identities.)

She is back in school and on the road to recovery, thanks in part to the Pope support group that meets once a week.

Every high school in the Cobb County School System has some type of program for recovering addicts, but Pope's is considered one of the best.

"We are pushing, too — encouraging schools to do this," said Jeff Dess of Cobb schools' Prevention/Intervention Center. "They are all fairly productive."

Pope's group has 11 students who have been in drug and alcohol

treatment centers or are continuing to undergo treatment for chemical dependency.

Stacey entered a treatment center for behavioral problems two years ago, but said she "cooned" her way out and continued to drink and get high.

"I thought about suicide constantly," she said last week as the group met in the school's guidance office.

Stacey checked into a hospital program after meeting Mrs. Hanson, and she's been free of drugs ever since.

Starting back to school is nearly as difficult as staying sober for recovering addicts.

Drugs have been their priority for so long, they've had to change their thinking process, counselors say. Most are older than their classmates because they've skipped or failed classes and then taken off more time for rehabilitation.

Some say they've had few problems concentrating on schoolwork, but others say it's a tough task.

"I had to learn how to rethink because every decision I made was irrational," said Jeff, a sophomore, who said he still thinks about getting high almost every day as he undergoes treatment at Straight Inc. in Marietta.

Jeff started using drugs in eighth grade, mainly because of family problems, he said. His brother was placed in a mental institution, and then his parents were divorced.

"I wouldn't go anywhere unless I had a lot of money or pot," Jeff said. To maintain a steady supply, he broke into houses, stealing whatever he could find to pawn.

The result was jail and then treatment for drug and alcohol addiction at a center where, he said, he lived for nearly a year about his willingness to be clean and sober. He has only 30 days left in the program at Straight Inc., an outpatient center.

For Susan, a senior, this is the first semester she has consistent-

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ly attended classes since she's been in high school. She started smoking pot and taking cocaine with an older brother. Her mother finally found out when she overdosed.

She got into trouble with the police, and a judge ordered her into drug and alcohol treatment. Her heart has failed twice because of drug and alcohol abuse.

Peer pressure is one of the toughest things for these students to deal with — that and the reputation they had as “drugheads.”

Said Beth, a senior: “A lot of my friends would rag on me and say I was a ‘narc’” when she came back to school. “Narc” is slang for narcotics agent.

“It was hard at first,” she said. “I

freaked out so bad when I came back.”

Research shows that recovering student-addicts are offered some type of drug within the first 20 minutes after they return to school from treatment, Mrs. Peterson said.

“Right when I came back to school, somebody pulled out a joint in front of me,” Stacey said. “I thought I was going to have a cow.” She said she left school almost immediately and went back to the treatment center.

Teachers have to learn to adjust to the students when they come back to school, Ms. Hanson said, because they're accustomed to these students being under the influence of drugs.

“They come back to a reputation that's still here,” Mrs. Hanson said.

The student-addicts have to build a new image and surround themselves with new friends who don't

drink or get high.

“Before, [people] were only your friends if they had a bag [of marijuana] or I had a bag,” said Mike, a sophomore who started smoking pot in the fourth grade when his family moved to Norcross from Athens.

He's been straight for 13 months and is almost finished with Straight's rehabilitation program.

“Now it's just people ... I enjoy being around people,” he said.

For others, the most difficult part is breaking off relationships with people they really cared about — and watching those old friends continue to get high.

“Letting go is the hardest part,” said Alice, a junior, who said she turned to treatment when she “hit emotional bottom.”

But it's worth it, Stacey said. “I feel so free today.”