

3 teens looking forward to drug-free lives in '90s

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In their hopes and ambitions, the three teen-agers are much like other young adults entering new phases of their lives.

Lisa [REDACTED], 18, a drug-treatment para-professional, recently became engaged to be married. Ben [REDACTED] 17, an athletic, self-described "all-American kid," looks forward to graduating from high school and eventually becoming a Navy pilot. Burk [REDACTED] 18, wants to enter the business world as a fashion merchandiser.

As 1989 ends and the decade of the 1990s opens, optimism echoes in their voices and shines in their smiles, which only occasionally are tinged with sadness as they explain where they've come from.

The three teen-agers are recovering drug addicts who, during recent interviews at Straight Inc., spoke about their pasts and the tragedy of addiction that estranged them from their families and endangered their lives. But they also spoke about plans for the future.

Straight Inc. is a long-term, family-oriented drug treatment program with nine facilities in the United States. The Irving facility serves clients ages 12 to 22.

Miss [REDACTED] already has "commenced" from the program. Mr. [REDACTED] is in the program's final phase and "anxious to get on with my life."

Mr. [REDACTED] feels much the same. "In the '90s, I hope for a lot of good things," he said. "The '80s have been a pain. . . . I got a Christmas card telling me the '90s are going to be my decade."

He believes that if his mother had not sought treatment for him, "I'd probably be dead right now . . . in prison or dead."

The three young people have similar stories of youthful addiction, of trying to fit in with their peers and taking drugs because it was fun.

Miss [REDACTED] and Mr. [REDACTED] said they began experimenting with drugs or alcohol at age 9. Eventually, drugs led to suicide attempts, running away from home or a general inability to function in society -- problems they fear many teen-agers are facing.

Jeanne Colton, an assistant administrator at Straight, said the program's first phase tackles the problem of making the kids realize the seriousness of their drug addictions. Unlike many adult addicts who seek treatment on their own, Ms. Colton said, adolescents frequently reach treatment centers as a result of problems with the law or intervention by their families.

Mr. [REDACTED] who used drugs ranging from alcohol to LSD, said he became a heavy drug user by the time he was about 14. He entered the treatment program on Feb. 15, 1988. He notes that it was the day after Valentine's Day.

"That weekend was the last straw. I was sitting in my room, just drinking, drinking, and my mom knew what I was doing, but she didn't do anything about it because she felt it was better to have me doing that at home, where she knew where I was," Mr. [REDACTED] said. "I ended up on the roof of the house, threatening to jump off. I guess I was so lonely, I wanted to know that people cared about me."

Mr. [REDACTED] entered the program in July 1988 after admitting to his parents and to himself that he had a drug problem.

"I was just hurting pretty bad. I felt like a loser," he said. "I felt useless. I had a lot of goals that I didn't feel like I was achieving. I just couldn't figure out what was wrong."

Miss [REDACTED] began the program on Nov. 5, 1986, and finished in October 1987. She was brought to the facility after she was caught using drugs, later ran away from home and spent a month in Las Vegas.

"All my friends were people that were doing drugs," she said. "I was just doing what everybody else was doing. When I first started, it was just something I could do on Friday nights, something I could do with my brother, 'cause he was also doing drugs, and then it just started going downhill."

As they get ready to enter a new decade with their changed lives, Miss [REDACTED] Mr. [REDACTED] and Mr. [REDACTED] are reflecting on the changes that have occurred.

"I never would have thought that you had to get your feelings out to feel better," Miss [REDACTED] said. "I thought you just had to smile and pretend you were happy and everything would be all right."

Mr. ■ who had to face the great amount of anger he carried inside him, said he hopes to finish high school "in the top 10 percent, hopefully in the top 5 percent, of my class.' He also wants to go ocean sailing with his father and perhaps even get a scholarship to enter the U.S. Naval Academy.

"But I know that wherever I go to college, I'll do well,' Mr. ■ said.

More immediately, Mr. ■ said, he's looking forward to finishing the Straight program, looking toward the time when he can feel wholly free again.

"Before I came in here, I wasn't inwardly free. Now I am, but I'm not outwardly free yet,' he said.

Straight is an intensive, long-term outpatient program. A client in the initial phase lives with a host family that has a child in an advanced stage of the program.

The client is allowed to return later to his or her home and, even later, to school or work. The client continues through a five-phase program -- gradually withdrawing from active participation in the program while gaining increased responsibility -- before graduating.

Mr. ■ recently returned to school and admits that it has not been easy.

"But it's been a growth experience,' he said.

And as New Year's Eve approached, traditionally the biggest party night of the year, all three remarked that their plans for ringing in 1990 were considerably different than they would have been had they still been using drugs.

Miss ■ bought a formal dress.

"I'm going to a formal party . . . and then maybe go downtown to walk around. Just have fun,' she said.

Mr. ■ planned to attend a "sober' party sponsored by an Alcoholics Anonymous chapter. "I really don't know what it's like to party sober,' he said. "It's going to be a neat experience.'

Mr. ■ was unsure about his plans. An AA function was one possibility.

"Or maybe I'll do something with my parents,' he said. "Whatever I do, there will be a big difference: This year I'll be able to remember it.'

- Caption: PHOTO(S): 1.The Dallas Morning News: Randy Eli Grothe Lisa ■ a former drug addict, now works as a counselor at the Straight Inc. treatment center. 2.Ben ■ . . . the 17-year-old would like to finish high school and become a pilot. 3.Burk ■ . . . the 18-year-old hopes to become a fashion merchandiser. PHOTO LOCATION: 1. - 3. Teenagers (cf 35977).

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