

It's past time to find answers

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- Author/Byline: THOM MARSHALL, Staff
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THE mother wrote her letter after returning from the cemetery. "Today is my son's 25th birthday," she wrote.

She took flowers to his grave to mark the occasion. It is something she does every year. A private ceremony. A time for memories.

"He died a week before his 21st birthday. The coroner classified his death a suicide," she wrote. "I'm not so sure. Friends picked him up late that afternoon and by dark, he died. Is it suicide if someone watches you die?"

The mother said in her letter that what happened on his last afternoon was but a small part of her son's suffering. She said he "endured a slow, painful death."

She said: "His first experiment with drugs was the beginning of the end. After that, he had no choice. He lived in an altered state, a chemically induced mental illness."

And now his mother takes flowers to his grave. And kneels. And cries. Their mothers are frustrated

"Friends were around as long as it was party time," she wrote. "Doctors were around as long as the money was. Family was around until strength gave away. Drugs had power over my son, his friends, his doctors, his family."

Four years, it has been.

"Today, I read in the paper that nothing has changed," this mother wrote. "Drugs are still in power."

Recently in this space, we met another mother with a son hooked on drugs. Crack had not killed him but he is lost to the streets. His mother had to lock him out of her house to protect herself and her daughter. She talked with a newspaper reporter because she didn't know how else to reach her son to wish him a happy 22nd birthday. She said she hopes her son lives to see his 23rd.

Response to that mother's plight was considerable. Many other mothers wrote letters. Mothers with sons on drugs. Sons living on the streets or making everyone miserable at home. Sons who have been caught breaking the law to get money for drugs.

Some mothers wrote they want to get treatment for their sons but cannot afford private facilities. Their children already have exhausted the family savings from getting into trouble with the law or from previous, unsuccessful attempts at treatment.

Effective drug treatment on the open market carries an enormous price tag. Insurance policies sometimes cover part of it, but in many cases the limits in the insurance plan are reached when the treatments still are in the earliest stages.

There are public drug treatment facilities to help addicts break the habit. But many stay filled and have waiting lists. It can be frustrating. The Houston Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse can help match need with availability.

But some mothers say their children should have long-range help, an extended treatment program, if they are going to stay off drugs and turn their lives around. Other than 'quick fixes'

And so we come to the mother who wrote a letter that tells a drug story with a happier ending.

She said a non-profit, family-oriented treatment program called Straight "takes teen-age druggies and turns them into sober, spiritual, law-abiding young people.

"I know," this mother said. "I have a son who was drinking heavily and using and selling drugs. He has spent his senior year at Straight and is a totally changed young man ... (who) now has a chance at a life, instead of death because of alcohol or drugs."

The mother said the Straight program has five parts:

1. The child works on himself and his problems.
2. The family works on problems.

3. The child returns to school or work.
4. The child works on sober, strong friendships.
5. The child gives back to the group and establishes himself in an organization that offers continuing support.

The mother said that following the Straight program are six months of aftercare to make sure the now former drug abuser is adjusting to life away from Straight.

"I believe that changes in people cannot be `quick fixes,'" this mother said. "Children and parents have to gradually learn new ways of coping with life's problems."

She said cost for the Straight program "is about \$800 a month" - less than the cost for one day at many private facilities. Straight does not spend money on advertising, so many people have not heard of it. But it has been around for many years. The mother said it started in Florida and quickly spread to other states.

She said the Texas office to contact for more information is: Straight Inc. - Dallas, 2900 Gateway Drive, Suite 600, Irving, Texas 75063. That phone number is (214) 550-1177.

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