

KIDS BATTLING SUBSTANCE ABUSE

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Vanessa [REDACTED] rocked back and forth as she held onto the bench. There were times during her conversation that her crying became uncontrollable. [REDACTED], 14, told how disappointed she is with herself and of the jealousy she has toward her outgoing twin sister, Hillary. "I feel sad now. I feel like crying," she said.

A boy in blue jeans stood up and told the class about the reprimand he'd gotten that day in school -- an action he thought was amusing. Fortunately for him, his peers did not. "I care about you a lot," a voice said to him. "But you need to care about what people are saying."

Within the isolation of four walls, a group of teenagers come together daily to discuss their day, how they feel and to get burdens off their chest. The girls sit on one side, the boys on the other. The youngsters are part of a team called Growing Together Inc., a 51/2-year-old private, non-profit organization dedicated to helping kids kick the habit of substance abuse.

"One of the basic concepts of our program is kids helping kids," said Growing Together's Program Director Mickey Blanchard. "When the child comes into treatment they do not go into their own home." Instead, they are placed in host homes, which are homes of parents whose child is also undergoing the 40-week treatment within the facility.

Derived from a sister program in Sarasota called L.I.F.E. (Life Is For Everyone), Growing Together educates parents and siblings on drug and alcohol co-dependency and disfunction, in addition to what signs to look for of an addict. Family members also learn how to recognize manipulation from the addict, and most important, how to maintain communication and openness with their youngster.

Licensed by HRS and accredited by the Joint Commission of Health Care Organization, Growing Together receives no federal, state or local aid, but relies solely on private donations and benefits.

Growing is categorized into six learning phases and takes the abuser through a strict, daily regimen of counseling, rap sessions, group therapy, education, self awareness and esteem building and self discipline.

First phasers are placed in a host home where they live and learn from families who are further advanced in the program. First phasers participate in a 101/2 hour a day routine. Goals here are to encourage the student to accept himself, to admit to himself about his addiction and to make a genuine commitment toward recovery.

The remaining phases get students to make rational decisions while rebuilding relations with family and friends, returning to school or work and adapting to a drug free lifestyle. Students are expected to successfully proceed with each phase until they have reached the final one called the seventh stepper.

Many seven steppers go on to become peer counselors. Emily [REDACTED], 17, is one of them. [REDACTED] was introduced to drugs by schoolmates when she was 12. She said she did it because she "wanted to fit in." Now she is helping others kick the habit, but not without its difficulty. "I've talked to some people before but the kids are so much in denial," a commonly known reaction with substance abusers.

- Caption: PHOTOC.J. WALKER/Staff PhotographerParticipants in Growing Together Inc. include (from left, standing) Vanessa [REDACTED], Jennifer [REDACTED] and Jennifer [REDACTED]
- Memo: SCHOOL NOTES

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