

TEEN'S VICTORY OVER DRUGS INSPIRES OTHERS IN PROGRAM

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LAKE WORTH -- The walls of the room are painted banana-yellow and spruced up with pictures of beaming children flying kites, jumping rope and selling 5-cent lemonade.

The teen-agers who are huddled cross-legged on the floor sometimes glance at the pictures, at carefree children doing the things children are supposed to do, but quickly look away.

If the walls told the story of their childhoods, they would see dark visions of pills and pot, desperate mothers and fed-up fathers, young lives muddled by addiction and despair.

Instead, the three girls look to their 19-year-old leader, only a few years older than they are, who is guiding the group through a therapy session about drug addiction. About escape.

"Don't run away from your problems. You've got to deal with your feelings," Jennifer ██████ said in a composed, encouraging voice.

The teen-agers in the Growing Together drug rehabilitation program nod and listen carefully because they know ██████ understands their painstaking climb out of a life of substance abuse and denial.

She has been there. She is their success story.

█████ said she started using drugs when she was 12 years old, kicked the habit three years later after several suicide attempts and was now about to graduate from Atlantic High School in Delray Beach armed with a full scholarship to an art school in Philadelphia this fall.

█████ said she started using drugs -- marijuana, hashish, cocaine, alcohol, anything she could get her hands on -- because of an unstable home life. She dropped out of school in ninth grade.

"I've always been a bad kid, a burnout," ██████ said on Wednesday. "My mom was always out of the house, and I was looking to be liked, accepted and loved. I looked at other families and always wondered what it would have been like to have a mom who maybe packed lunches for me. I hated myself so much."

█████ eventually ended up in Growing Together, a nonprofit adolescent drug rehabilitation program, and weaned herself from drugs with the help of counselors her own age who encouraged her to feel good about herself. She re-enrolled in school.

Now, ██████ has worked her way up at Growing Together and spends at least 40 hours a week there in charge of 10 counselors. She is graduating from Atlantic High School today after spending the last three years in honors classes. And she has not touched drugs or alcohol in four years.

"People here told me they loved me and cared about me," she said softly. "They told me I was worth it. I made the decision that I wanted to like myself. I look in the mirror now and am proud of what I see. I'm finally going to graduate high school. I was just part of a cycle in my family, but hopefully it is going to stop with me."

And she wants other teen-agers to feel the same way.

Christine ██████, 15, has been in the program for five months, battling a past of prescription-pill binges.

█████ said, "I get so discouraged and stuff, but I look up to her. She's an inspiration."

The program's executive director, Barbara Griffith, said ██████ was once a girl without any hope who used drugs as a source of temporary escape. Now, ██████ has plans to study art therapy.

"She has determination," Griffith said. "It's the kids helping each other, and now Jennifer is giving back to the kids."

"This program has given me my life back," ██████ said. "Before, anything I ever started, like school, I never finished. But that's different now. I'm in charge of my life. And it's just beginning."

- Caption: PHOTOStaff photo/NICHOLAS VON STADEN: Counselor Jennifer [REDACTED] holds a group therapy session with teens from Growing Together, a nonprofit drug rehabilitation program. (Color)
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