

## RULING A LIFELINE FOR ADDICTED KIDS

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When Palm Beach Circuit Judge Richard Burk ruled last week that parents no longer need court orders to make children stay in drug treatment programs, Judy and Bill [REDACTED] were relieved.

The Jensen Beach couple had been prepared, if necessary, to commit their 16-year-old son, Nathan, to Growing Together, a Lake Worth treatment program he's fled before. Now, they won't have to. The [REDACTED] know how extreme committing a child sounds to parents who haven't dealt with addicted kids. It would have sounded extreme to them, too, a year ago, before drug abuse turned their lives inside out.

Judge Burk's ruling - the lawsuit was by Growing Together, filed by board member and Palm Beach County attorney Jack Scarola - will be applauded by other treatment centers in Florida. Any child can appeal forced treatment. But now, when kids are brought in the front door by parents, the program can use reasonable restraint to keep them from walking out the back door. Previously, some courts had favored children's rights.

``For a court to say, `He's got rights . . . ' " Judy [REDACTED] laments with frustration. ``We're the ones who are morally and financially responsible for him."

``Nathan does have rights," Bill [REDACTED] says. ``But his thinking was clouded by drugs."

I've written about this family before, or so it seems. Actually, the names and faces change. The story remains the same. ``Good parents" never believe it can happen to them. Until it happens.

Not my kid . . .

By anybody's definition, the [REDACTED] are ``good parents." Judy [REDACTED] a stay-at-home mom. Their house is a gathering place for kids. The family goes to church. In fact, it was when Nathan visited Disney World with a church group that his drug habit was discovered. He and other boys were caught smoking marijuana. They made a great show of apologizing and pledging never to do it again.

``And we believed 'em," Mrs. [REDACTED] says. ``They were teenagers. Teenagers experiment." But Nathan continued to use. Finally, his girlfriend revealed that his problem was bigger. He was dealing to support his habit.

``She saved his life," Judy [REDACTED]r says gratefully.

The [REDACTED] were stunned. They knew Nathan's friends. ``They were good kids," Mrs. [REDACTED] says. ``But the drug problem is so widespread, so serious."

They sought help for Nathan at Savannas Hospital in Port St. Lucie, but their health insurance didn't cover the \$750-a-day treatment. Then friends from church told them about Growing Together, where their daughter had been treated successfully. They took Nathan there Sept. 19. He immediately began plotting his escape.

It was two months later, while in a Lake Park foster home, that Nathan fled. Judy and Bill [REDACTED] raced to Lake Park and searched six hours for him.

``It was the worst day of my life," Mr. [REDACTED] says.

When Nathan was found and police tried to arrest him, he ran. The cops tackled and handcuffed him. ``He was verbally violent," Bill [REDACTED] says. ``He pleaded with us not to send him back. He said he'd just run again." With great sadness, his father contacted an attorney about committing his son.

Today, Nathan is back at Growing Together. His parents never had to commit him. And now that the rights of parents and children are in better balance, they probably never will. He has admitted his addiction and is working on it. Bill and Judy [REDACTED] drive from Jensen Beach to Lake Worth twice a day. The whole family must attend meetings.

It's an enormous commitment. They're paying the costs themselves. They've put their lives on hold. But they don't regret forcing Nathan into treatment. They are, after all, good parents.

\* Fran Hathaway is an editorial writer for The Palm Beach Post.

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