

SUBSTANCE USERS SEEK PEER HELP - TEEN ADDICTS RESIST PARENTAL 'PREACHING'

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Kali had been drinking wine, smoking marijuana and dropping LSD since she was in middle school.

"I was headed towards destruction," said Kali, 16, who wanted to protect her family's privacy by not using her last name. "I only went to school when I needed more drugs. And I ran away all the time."

It seemed that no one could talk to Kali, at least no adult. Her mother began looking for a rehabilitation program run by teens her daughter's age.

She found Growing Together in Lake Worth, one of an increasing number of programs in Broward and Palm Beach counties run on a "kids helping kids" philosophy: The peer counselors are recovering substance abusers.

"I didn't want another grownup preaching to me about all the wrong choices I've made for myself," Kali said. "I needed to talk to someone who had hit rock bottom like I had, who knew what it was like to wake up feeling worthless and messed up."

Kali checked into Growing Together about eight months ago.

"When we receive a client or 'newcomer,' we pair them up with someone further along in the program, or 'old-timer,'" said Mickey Bowman, executive director of Growing Together. "During the day, they go through therapeutic sessions together and just talk to one another. Then, at night, the newcomer goes home with their partner, rather than going home with their parents."

The program lasts about a year. Then, for the next four months, participants return three times a week for counseling sessions.

The Starting Place, a United Way agency in Fort Lauderdale, uses a similar philosophy.

"I had lost my faith in adults," said Roccio, 14, a recovering alcoholic and marijuana addict at the Starting Place. Roccio also did not want his last name published to protect his privacy.

"I learned how to drink from my mom. I smoked pot with my aunts and uncles. Drugs were my link with the adult world."

Said Silvia Porro, a therapist at the Starting Place: "There is just a lot of pressure for acceptance in school and in life. By pairing new clients with a big sibling in our program, we hope to use peers in a more positive way."

Delray Beach DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) Officer Sal Arena said he began incorporating more peer-on-peer scenarios into his school presentations three years ago.

"Kids can just relate to other kids," said Arena, who has been a DARE officer for seven years.

"Someone their age has more pull than an officer, and a lot more pull than their parents."

Kali said it was her 17-year-old partner who convinced her to take rehabilitation seriously.

"There's six steps you have to go through before you can get out of this program," Kali said. "And I was able to con my way up to step four, just by faking that I was really into getting better. But the girl paired with me knew that something was wrong, that I wasn't for real. And, when I was sleeping over at her house, she found some alcohol I had been hiding underneath the covers."

"She made sure I was bumped back down to step one and I've had to start all over again. Now, I'm actually doing this for me. I know she didn't tell on me to get me in trouble. She was trying to save my life. And she has."

- Caption: PHOTOS staff photo/MARK RANDALL (Photo ran in Palm Beach) Kali, 16, answers the phone at Growing Together Inc., a nonprofit organization that provides youth drug and alcohol rehabilitation. She is advancing through the program with help from other teens.

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