

THE ROOM WHERE LOVE GROWS

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Patti [REDACTED] wound up in this big, drab room after the summer morning she drove to a McDonald's she'd never been to in her life and watched her daughter, Julie, emerge from the early-morning shadows. She had been away for weeks, staying God-knows-where, and had returned home only to run again. And then came the call at 3 a.m.

Mom, will you pick me up? asked a tired little voice.

[REDACTED], 44 and The Good Mother of three, did just that. And what she saw almost made her pass out.

"She looked so thin, so bedraggled. And she just got in the car and hung her head and I said, 'Have we hit bottom?' and she said, 'Yes.'

That night, 16-year-old Julie [REDACTED] was taken to Growing Together, a teen drug and alcohol rehabilitation center. And now each Friday night, Patti [REDACTED], bone-weary from a hard week's work, drops everything and schleps to the pink concrete building in downtown Lake Worth.

She parks, walks to the glass doors and is buzzed in. Then she walks upstairs, finds a seat and prepares to divulge her private-most thoughts to a roomful of strangers.

Welcome to Family Night.

It is here that families - crying and confused - try to restore their lives. It is here that mere children - some as young as 12 years old - rattle off their drug-use lists: pot, LSD, rohypnol, unknown pills, cocaine powder, crack cocaine, Special K, heroin.

And it is here that all the dirty little secrets come out. Finally.

The curtain opens and there they sit, parents on one side, kids on the other, staring at one another. One boy in the back cranes his neck to see if his mom is there. A father finds his daughter and lets out a sigh. She looks so much better this week! More color in her face. It even looks as though she might be eating again. But he is afraid to hope.

Then things get rolling. A counselor offers some opening remarks about tonight's meeting topic - enabling - and then somebody's kid is standing at the microphone in the center of the room. All eyes on him, and, boy, does he know it. He opens his mouth and talks. To the floor.

First his name. Then, without so much as a moment's hesitation, he rattles off all the drugs he's done. For someone who's spent the past 12 months perfecting the art of lying, this confession is A Big Deal. No one in the room makes a sound, lest they frighten him back into silence.

He keeps talking, mumbling despite the counselor's insistence that he speak up. He tells a story about a past drug experience, something that he now realizes was wrong. Just a little wrong, but it's a start.

"We were driving and we had been drinking and snorting cocaine. I'd thrown up somewhere, I'm not sure where, and could barely walk. They carried me to the car.

"Then I remember going to my friend's house and his mom was there and we snorted a few lines with her and I felt so sick, like I was gonna throw up again, but all my friends were telling me to do some more lines because that would calm me down. But my heart was racing and I just kept thinking about my little sister and how she'd feel if I never came home again. I thought, 'I'm going to die. Right here.' But I didn't. I did a few more lines like they told me.

"That made me feel better."

On the other side of the room, someone hands his mother the Kleenex box. She remembers the day. It was 2 in the afternoon when he finally came home, so out of it she hardly recognized him. He smelled. His eyes were bloodshot. She's not sure how he ever made it up those front steps.

That was the day she realized she had to get help. Because she finally knew that if she didn't - if she didn't do something NOW - pretty soon she'd be visiting her boy at the cemetery. And 13 is way too young to die.

Growing Together Inc. is a no-nonsense, tough-love program that relies heavily on counseling from other kids who have graduated from the program. Results can be slow and discouraging and many a parent has pulled a child out after months of family commitment.

"There are parts of the program I still don't like," says Blake [REDACTED], a 22-year-old former addict who now works at Growing Together as a peer counselor. "But it works."

The program works like this: Advance the kids in stages, with each stage providing more and more freedom, more and more decision-making. Provide a strict regimen. Do not tolerate talking back or disruptiveness.

Growing Together accepts addicts ages 12-22 and costs \$13,500, regardless of how long it takes to "graduate." Some insurance companies pay for the treatment.

In the early phase, kids don't stay with their parents - they go home with someone who is farther along in the program. Months can pass without parents and children talking in private.

"Everybody is supposed to be working on themselves," says Carol [REDACTED], whose 15-year-old son, Dustin, has been in the program for a year.

Friday nights are especially important because it's the point at which families are talking, honestly, about what has brought them to this point. The meetings are usually the first time new parents hear the truth about what their child has been doing.

"It allows the parents to start purging themselves, if you will," says program executive director Mickey Bowman. "It's almost like the parents can now start saying how they feel."

In the early stages of the program, the teenagers all dress alike. No blue jeans, only program-issued khaki pants or shorts and T-shirts. No music. No television, radio or telephones. No unnecessary reading. Break the rules and you go back to Phase One.

The strict regimen has angered both teenagers and their parents. In 1990 - three years after Growing Together was first licensed - state officials investigated abuse complaints after teenagers called the state's child abuse hot line and said program officials were using force to keep them there. The parents of some of those teenagers also filed complaints and, at one point, state officials refused to re-license the drug program.

But in 1994, a court ruled that the treatment center could "reasonably restrict" clients who want out. The program's lawyers argued that it's the rare child who doesn't, at some point, want to run.

"When it gets to this point," says Circuit Judge Howard Berman, who for many years was a juvenile court judge and saw again and again the desperate state of many of today's families, "parents are really, really concerned about their kids.

"They've probably tried everything."

Yes, they probably have. Just ask Carol and Art [REDACTED]

Dustin [REDACTED] will turn 16 on Wednesday. But he won't be celebrating at home. He's going to miss Thanksgiving, again, and probably Christmas, again.

"I'm not sure my heart will ever repair," says his mom. "Sometimes I feel like the despair has taken over. I feel like running away. This isn't why I had children."

Dustin was always a sweet kid, but rather tortured. He was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder when he was 2 years old, started getting into fights in the second grade - "And when I say fights," says his mom, "I mean punching" - and finally went on Ritalin in the fifth grade. But that didn't solve Dustin's problems.

"I was always trying to protect my little boy who needed a little extra love, a little extra care. He'd have to be told five or six times before he listened," says Carol. "He says now I was a total control freak. But I look back and think, 'That's the only way I could get things done.' "

When things went from bad to worse, Dustin's parents tried more talking, more counseling, more at-home discipline. But it was clear Dustin needed something else. He was running away as early as 12 and the Beckmanns suspected he was smoking pot. Finally, they sent Dustin to a military school in North Carolina. He did great and ended the year second in his class, demonstrating to everyone - including himself - just how smart he really is.

But he didn't want to go back. The [REDACTED] sent him anyway, and within weeks, he was kicked out for fighting. His parents brought him home, and the family's life turned 100 percent horrible.

By the time they found Growing Together, Dustin was drinking and doing LSD, cocaine, even crushing his Ritalin and snorting it. And he was still running away, sometimes staying gone for days. The day Art and Carol [REDACTED] left their oldest son at Growing Together, he

didn't shed a tear.

But his mother and father sobbed for hours.

In his year at Growing Together, Dustin has advanced as far as Phase Four - which allows the client to go to their regular school and start going places outside the program - but he's always relapsed, and is now back at Phase One. The most recent setback came just last week, when he tried to run away after a disagreement with his parents during a home visit. Carol and Art [REDACTED], and their youngest son, Kyle, 13, felt as though they'd been sucker-punched.

"But he came back," says his mother. "He walked out that door and down the street and then he turned around and came home. And he cried.

"A year ago, he wouldn't have done that."

Another Family Night is coming to an end. Someone fetches the Kleenex box and returns it to the rear table and someone else makes an announcement about the upcoming silent auction and everyone is wiping their eyes and pretty much looking as though they've been run over by a truck.

"I've been coming for two years," says Donna Haines, who runs the program's sibling counseling sessions. "And I still cry."

And then they stand, parents alongside parents, teenagers alongside teenagers, and link arms while they sing a hokey campfire song.

It only takes a spark, to get a fire going ...

And soon all those around, will warm up to its glowing.

The toll of the emotional evening is apparent in the 100 exhausted voices joining in an off-key chorus, but one beautiful voice is a standout.

It belongs to a young woman. A young woman who that evening took the microphone and told a roomful of strangers all her little secrets. A young woman who has snorted cocaine and smoked pot, who drank and drank and drank until she puked and then passed out, whereabouts unknown.

A young woman whose voice is soft and wonderful and sweet. Innocent, almost.

A young woman who is surely just a child.

- Caption: PHOTO (2 C & 3 B&W) Photos by LANNIS WATERS/Staff Photographer1. (C) At Growing Together's Family Night sessions each Friday, family members such as Carol and Kyle [REDACTED] sit across the room from those in rehab. Dustin Carol's son and Kyle's brother has been in the program a year.2. (C) It's 16-year-old Julie [REDACTED]' turn to talk about her drug problems. Family Night may be the first time parents hear the truth about what their child has been doing.3. (B&W) In the early stages of rehab, opposite sides of this big, impersonal room is as close as the addicts get to their family members.4. (B&W) Dustin [REDACTED], who'll turn 16 on Wednesday, has advanced as far as Phase Four in the Growing Together program, but has always relapsed and is now back to Phase One.5. (B&W) At the end of the Friday night sessions, family members form a circle and sing a hokey campfire song about the simplest of hopes: It only takes a spark, to get a fire going ...

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