

GRAD WHO HIT BOTTOM IS NEAR TOP OF HIS CLASS

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Officers had a solid tip that Jeff ██████ was selling drugs at Martin County High School in February 1997.

They brought out the dogs to sniff his car, parked in the school's lot and slapped handcuffs around his wrists after finding 20 doses of LSD in his wallet.

Instead of heading to class, ██████ was headed to jail.

"I thought it was the end of my life," recalled ██████ now a soft-spoken 18-year-old. "I wanted to die. I didn't think I'd ever be able to graduate from any high school."

Less than 18 months after that awful day, ██████ did graduate Saturday from Forest Hill High School with a 4.0 grade average and a No. 3 ranking in his class of 260 students.

Clean. Sober. Headed for college.

"Jeff was a kid whose heart was good - he just got involved in the wrong things," said Stuart Greydanus, ██████ teacher in honors physics and trigonometry this year. "It wasn't as if he had been a bad kid who somehow had a revelation. He was a derailed kid who got back on track."

Getting there was much harder than it had to be. Once a champion long-distance runner and triathlete, and an A and B student, ██████ seemed destined for a graduation day just like the one he had.

That was before he took his first hit of acid at age 14, simply because a guy he knew told him, "It will change the way you look at things."

That was before his drug use grew from trying to be cool on the weekends to selling pot and LSD to getting high at school and getting caught with drugs - twice.

He was kicked out of Martin County High for the first time during his sophomore year. In the locker room, he was handing over the money he had collected for selling candy to benefit the cross-country team. Out of his pocket fell a bag of pot - right onto his coach's shoe.

██████ spent the rest of that year in an alternative school. He stayed off drugs, but he was clean basically because he was in counseling and they would randomly test him for drugs.

He was arrested and kicked out again - after the LSD incident - in February 1997. His name was in the newspapers, his booking mug shot plastered on the television.

"We had no idea what we'd do," his father, Jim, said.

The ██████ found Growing Together Inc., an adolescent substance abuse treatment program based in Lake Worth. This is not an easy program. Children don't see their parents for the first three months.

"We're 12 to 18 months; sometimes it takes even longer. It's quite grueling, but it works," said Ruth Sargent, a spokeswoman.

"I hated it," Jeff ██████ said, "but it was good for me."

██████ motivation was the books. He had always liked school, had always wanted to go to college and hoped this didn't have to mean the end to all of that.

The ██████ family tries not to think of what could have been. Instead, they bask in their son's small successes: Their son has stayed away from drugs, has made new friends who shun the drugs he once craved, was given the outstanding senior award in five of his subjects at a ceremony last week and will attend Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich., or the University of North Florida in Jacksonville in the fall.

- Caption: PHOTO (B&W)LANNIS WATERS/Staff Photographer Jeffrey ██████ receives his diploma from Principal Carlos Rosello Saturday. He will attend Calvin College or the University of North Florida in the fall.

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