

FROM ACHIEVER TO ADDICT

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Editor's note: The family in this story requested that The Post not publish their real names. Carl, Gayle and Katie Bailey are pseudonyms.

Gayle Bailey calls it her "light-bulb moment," that life-changing day in the fall of 1996 when she knew her youngest child, her only daughter, was in serious trouble with drugs.

Parked on Highway 70, Gayle was watching the Okeechobee High School homecoming parade from her car. And the band marched by. But Katie, who was a senior that year, didn't have any interest in being in the band.

Then the candidates for homecoming queen went past. And she realized Katie didn't want to be homecoming queen, either.

The cheerleaders? Nope. The senior float? Uh-uh.

"I loved high school. I expected her to love high school," Gayle says. "Then it just hit me. My daughter's an addict. She didn't care about any of that. All she cared about was getting high."

Nice house to crack house

Gayle and her husband, Carl, went to see the Oscar-nominated movie *Traffic* a few weeks after it came out in January. They'd heard that a storyline in the film, which is about the war on drugs, was similar to what they went through with Katie.

In fact, it was eerie how much the teenage addict in the movie, Caroline Wakefield (played by Erika Christensen), resembled their daughter - a pretty blonde in baggy bluejeans making her way toward people, places and pain no parent wants to imagine.

"Been there, done that," Gayle says with a grim smile. There weren't any big surprises in the movie. The "rich kid gone wrong" plot isn't exactly new. But the Baileys felt the movie's depiction of how rapid the decline can be for a young addict - even the daughter of a well-known and well-to-do family - was accurate. Kids from middle-class homes can find their way to a crack house as easily as anyone, say Katie's parents, who are prominent business owners in Okeechobee.

Sitting in the conference room at the Growing Together drug and alcohol treatment center in Lake Worth, Carl recalls that his daughter "went places you wouldn't go without an armed escort and an Uzi.

"You could interview 50 people here tonight (at the center's weekly family night), and you'll find they can tell you stories like that and worse."

Much worse.

In *Traffic*, Caroline Wakefield takes a quick and desperate detour from prep-school student to prostitute, turning tricks to get drugs. That is, until her father tracks her down at a flophouse and gets her into rehab fast. Which makes for a hopeful Hollywood ending that doesn't drag through too many gory details.

These are the scenes they didn't show you in the movie: The stealing. The dealing. The rape. The involuntary commitment to a treatment center.

The childhood gone. The life almost lost.

Katie was 18 when her parents had her committed to Growing Together for substance abuse. But she was 12, she says, when she had her first drink at a party. She wanted to fit in with her older brothers and his friends, and somebody handed her a bottle of Jim Beam. She couldn't put it down.

"All the things that happened that night explain what happened from there on," she says. "I lied. I cheated. I embarrassed my brothers. I woke up wrapped in a towel in the shower. And when it was all over, I wanted to do it over again."

So she did. "I didn't like the skin I was in," she says, shrugging. The drinking made her feel better for a while. It made it easier to blend in with any group she liked, to be a chameleon. But Katie always needed more.

And more. She drank at home, from the bottles in her parents' bar, adding water when they noticed some was missing. She took booze to school in a thermal cup. And she began smoking pot.

While other kids were satisfied with occasional experimentation, Katie was not. She was always ready to push it to the next level. And if one group of friends wasn't ready to go there with her, she'd find new friends.

It was no longer about being cool for Katie; it was just about feeling OK, feeding the need, getting rid of the pain. That, substance abuse counselors say, is the sign of a true addict. And because they are emotionally immature, adolescents' chemical dependency can occur very quickly, within weeks, psychologists say. It's harder for teens to bring themselves and their lives under control. They can't slow down their dependency the way adults can.

The middle-class cover-up

When she turned 16, Katie got a car. "Within two or three weeks, I flipped it," she says. She wasn't hurt, but she was drunk.

How many other close calls were there? Who knows, her parents say. Katie says the cops pulled her over at least three times before the Baileys were notified.

Gayle says she thinks officers believed they were doing them a favor by not arresting Katie, getting her into trouble and embarrassing the family, "because we were important people in Okeechobee."

The only reason she was held the fourth time, Katie says, is because she was with some known gang members. Her parents were called so they could protect her from the wrong element, she says, "but I was dealing for them."

She'd already found what she says was the perfect job for a kid on drugs, working at a drive-through convenience store. "That's where I hooked up with drug dealers and people from the upper class who just wanted cocaine for the weekend."

By the time she was 17, Katie was using cocaine every day, along with pot, Ecstasy, LSD and just about anything else she could get her hands on. She snorted Ritalin in a classroom at school. She brought cocaine to volleyball camp. "I couldn't go two weeks without it," she recalls. "Out of the question."

A coach at school expressed his concerns to Gayle and Carl during Katie's junior year, and they started watching her more closely. Her grades had dropped from B's and C's to D's and F's. Other teachers must have noticed, Katie says, but they didn't give her much trouble. "Being white matters," she says. "Being middle class matters."

And she was holding it together well enough to remain an athlete, playing volleyball and soccer at high school. She was the captain of the soccer team her senior year, even though, she says, "I went to every practice ripped out of my mind."

She was high all the time, really.

And she was raped. By a dealer, when she was high on Rohypnol, the date-rape drug. No one forced her to take the drug, she says. No one ever had to force her to take anything. But the sex was demanded, and she knew there was a gun under the man's mattress.

Still, she had mixed feelings when she left him. She knew she couldn't see him again for a while, and he was a good source for drugs.

Katie didn't have any real friends anymore. There were two girls she'd hang out with, but they just used each other to get drugs. They lied to each other and stole from each other.

It seemed normal, though, because she was surrounded by people just like her.

She was the bad crowd

Her parents got tougher.

She never was spoiled, Katie says. Her parents didn't wait on her. And she wasn't neglected. They always paid attention to what she was doing and how she was doing - even more than they did for her brothers.

But they did go out of town on business, she says.

That stopped when she was 17. "It was like, 'OK, we really need to do something.' "

It was a hard to get past the denial and excuses, Gayle says. "I thought, I smoked a little dope. I was OK. She'll be OK." But deep down, they knew it was worse than that.

The same held true for the new friends Katie was making, Carl remembers. "Everybody said, 'She's in a bad crowd.' She was the bad

crowd. She had a car, she had a job. She was the leader."

When Gayle found Katie's discarded liquor bottles in the garbage, Carl put the bottles back in her room, hoping the odor would make her sick and get her to stop drinking. But the smell was familiar, comforting. "I loved it," Katie says.

"It took a long time for my mom to see that she couldn't help me, no matter what she did."

And her parents were running out of creative ways to punish her, she says. She was grounded for most of the year when she was 17 but slipped out almost every night.

They'd tapped Katie's phone. Gayle even asked for urine samples. They tried sending her to therapy, Katie says. "But it really doesn't work when you're high."

Still, she was beginning to realize she was in serious trouble. "The thoughts got louder and louder: 'Look what you're doing to your family. Look what you're doing to yourself,' " she says. She just couldn't stop.

It was time to take the next step.

Gayle began checking out treatment programs: Outward Bound, Hazelden in Minnesota, a program based in Atlanta. But they didn't want Katie to be so far away.

Carl, who didn't drink or smoke, also had a hard time understanding the depth of his daughter's addiction. "It was an ego thing on my part," he says. "I thought, 'C'mon, I can intimidate a 105-pounder.' But she was tougher than any of us."

Katie remembers the arguments with Carl - and one in particular when, as usual, she put her mother in the middle. She remembers Gayle crying. "I think I remember, like, one tear came out of my eye. That was the first time I had an inkling of feeling of how much I was hurting them," Katie says.

In November 1996, the Baileys read an article in The Palm Beach Post about Growing Together. It was close to home. It had a higher success rate than most programs they'd read about. And parental involvement wasn't simply allowed - it was expected. In the earliest phase, the teens spend the night with families who are further along in the program, but eventually, everyone takes a group of kids home. There also are counseling sessions and weekly Parent Nights. It requires a serious commitment from the entire family to make the program work.

The day after the story ran, Carl and Gayle came to Lake Worth to check out the center for themselves. The day after that, Gayle came back and talked to two girls in the program: "Do you feel safe here?" she asked. They did.

Then she sat in the parking lot and watched the parents who took the teenagers home at night. "They looked just like me. They talked just like me. They drove cars just like mine."

One day at a time

Using the Marchman Act, a state law that allows a family member to request a court order that forces an addict into treatment, Gayle and Carl put Katie, who had turned 18 in September, into Growing Together.

"I can still remember that morning," Katie says. "I knew I was going away for a really long time."

In a way she was relieved. "I was just so unhappy, and so sick and tired, and tired of putting on a face and acting happy." Still, her first reaction was to run before they could take her away. Then she saw two police cars on the corner and knew there was no escape.

Katie begged the deputies who drove her to Growing Together to drop her off somewhere before they got to Lake Worth, promising they'd never see her again. She hoped they'd give in to her pleas. After all, they knew her, too, she says, "One of the officers who drove me, I partied with all the time."

But they didn't let her go. And when she arrived at Growing Together, she watched a door with no doorknob slam behind her. That was scary. Even scarier than visiting drug dealers in prison. (Oh, yes, Katie says. Savvy middle-class girls do that sort of thing when they want to score points with their suppliers. After all, the guys get out, eventually.)

Once inside Growing Together, she was torn. She wanted to find a way out of the mess she'd made of her life. But a part of her still wanted to manipulate the counselors and simply get out of there.

"Addicts say, 'One day at a time.' In (rehab), I had to take it one second at a time," she recalls.

It took 4 1/2 months before she stopped trying to find a way to get high. And one day, a counselor talked about honesty, and it clicked. She'd arranged to get cocaine from another client who was allowed to leave the facility to go to school, and, "I ratted myself out basically,"

Katie says. "I felt what honesty felt like and to do something without expecting to get something back."

And she began to change. Slowly.

Her family helped. Like the parents in Traffic, Carl and Gayle changed their lives to support her. They made the hour-and-a-half drive back and forth from Okeechobee to attend parent meetings and regular sessions with Katie in Lake Worth. They took their turn housing other addicted kids. They talked about their daughter's addiction to friends and family. And they became active and outspoken supporters of Growing Together.

But mostly, finally, Katie helped herself.

"I knew that there was life beyond rehab. The counselors talked to me about that. They talked to me about how they lived, and it seemed really, really nice," Katie remembers.

She was 19 when she left Growing Together. It took her 13 months to finish the program. She worked as a counselor for a year after that. Then she went to work for Carl's company - a matter of trust she finds "incredible."

It's a happy ending to rival any that Hollywood could come up with. But Katie and her parents don't play it up that way.

She is 22 now, clean and sober, on her own and going to school.

And that, they say, is just a beginning.

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Warning signs of adolescent substance abuse

Personality changes: Secrecy, dishonesty, irritability, anger or rage, selfishness, mood swings, chronic depression, uncommunicative, overly self-centered, manipulative, apathetic, overly defensive.

Family relationships: Irresponsibility, avoiding family activities, arguing, physical fights with parents or siblings, obvious intoxication, drug paraphernalia or traces of drugs hidden in bedroom, seclusiveness.

Physical appearance: Weight loss or gain, bloodshot eyes, excessive sleeping, dramatic changes in hair style and clothing, tattooing and piercing.

School performance: Skipping classes, tardiness, poor grades, suspension, expulsion.

Medical conditions: Skin or respiratory tract infections, chronic cough, extreme fatigue.

Source: Growing Together Inc.

- Caption: PHOTO (C) In Traffic, a government official finds that his daughter (played by Erika Christensen, shown here) is a drug addict. An Okeechobee family has lived the same scenario.
- Memo: Info box at end of text.

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