

ON THE WAY BACK - FROM WAY DOWN

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Everybody loves a youth redemption story, so long as we can voyeuristically peek in on whatever it was the redemptee was redeemed from and somebody assures us it couldn't happen to our kids.

Sorry. If it could happen to Ally Fowler, churchgoer, cheerleader, able student and product of a prosperous two-parent household, it could happen to practically any youngster not actually on a tether.

The Fort Pierce community college student, 18, now clean and sober, looks back on her high school years as something deeper than simply bad decisions to stay drunk, high and hung over.

"The drugs, drinking and sex are symptoms of addictive behavior," she said. "I was sick. I am in recovery. I have not had a drink or drugs or cigarettes or coffee for eight months. I am not in contact with anybody I have been high with. I am committed to my recovery."

If this sounds like somebody in a 12-step program, bingo. Fowler attends meetings. She is also in the home stretch of a seven-step program at Growing Together, a non-residential adolescent treatment program based in Lake Worth and supported by United Way. And not voluntarily either. She didn't go in kicking and screaming, but definitely cursing. Lots of cursing.

"I was cussing like a sailor - my father was sure I was possessed by the devil."

Now she wants to tell how - as far as she can tell - her descent into drug chaos began and ended.

Whatever the ravages of her teen years, they do not show on her face or figure. At 18, Ally Fowler could still pass for the 11th-grade varsity cheerleader she was. Her face was made for a corn flakes box. She quit the squad when cheerleading cut into her after-school work, which earned her drug money.

Just say 'no' way

How does a kid slough off 10,000 anti-drug messages and admonitions to just say no?

"It starts with addictive behavior," she said. "Acting out, lying, sneaking out. I started in eighth grade. I really considered drug and alcohol 'experimentation' part of being a normal teenager. I thought one day I would look back at it as a stage I went through."

If lack of self-esteem is an overworked catchphrase, it is because there is something to it, Fowler said.

"I felt horrible about myself. I wanted so badly to be liked that even making the cheerleading squad wasn't enough. Getting high one way or another made me feel better. It got to where I was always high, drunk or hung over. I could pass my courses and work after school. I worked for a vet and loved it. But as long as I could get drugs, I stayed high."

She drove drunk, too. "I was out until 4 and 5 a.m. in the mornings. I thank God that I did not hurt somebody."

Driving? No curfew? Where were her parents?

"I was spoiled. Let me just say they are in counseling with me, and very much a part of the Growing Together program."

After Fowler moved out of the house and into the apartment of her drug-dealing boyfriend, her mom got her into treatment on a level she could understand.

"She lied to me. She picked me up and told me we were going to family counseling. Basically, I was kidnapped 70 days before my 18th birthday."

70-day deal

So the deal was that she would be in treatment for 70 days whether she liked it or not and, if after she was 18 and could not be legally detained, she could elect to return to her chaotic life with the understanding that if she did, she was cut off from family support forever. Even with Fowler's reflexive urge to bolt, the seed of her recovery had already been planted.

"I was always looking ahead to adulthood, my 18th birthday, when I would magically quit drugs and drinking," and here she laughed. It was a lie and she knew it. "I was addicted. I was especially addicted to my boyfriend. I was sick and I couldn't recover without help."

So the intervention took. And no, it wasn't easy. Some of it was very, very painful, but the pain was portion-controlled and endurable, and the steps were there for the conscriptee to take. It wasn't cheap - \$20,000 for her family's income level - and the meter is still running. When her 18th birthday came around, she already knew she didn't want to return to the old life.

Was there a first sign, if not an epiphany, a recognizable indication that something had changed?

"Yes. After 40 days I was allowed to see my mother. She brought a flowered notebook. I loved it. And I thanked her for it."

Her mother said, "Wow! Something has changed."

Now on the Indian River Community College campus, she sees people who knew her when, and she has to tell them of her treatment and commitment to recovery.

"They say to me, 'Oh, you weren't so bad.' "

Well, there's bad and there's sick, and Fowler knows now that it is bad to be sick.

"When you are driving somewhere and all you can think about is getting there so you can roll a joint, you have an illness."

For information on Growing Together, call Stephanie D'Andrea in Lake Worth at (561) 585-0892.

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- **Caption: PHOTO (B&W)Photo by RON WIGGINS CLEAN AND SOBER: Ally Fowler has not had a drink or drugs or cigarettes or coffee for eight months.**

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