

## HIGH SOCIETY KIDS, DRUGS AND SAYING 'NO'

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Like every teen-ager since the beginning of time or thereabouts, he is fond of faded blue jeans, plaid shirts, and tennis shoes that look as if their last assignment were to beat unruly dirt clods into submission.

He has brown hair, a charming smile and an awesome appetite for drugs. All kinds.

"By ninth grade, I was taking any drug I could get my hands on," he said, and not, as you might expect, with the seen-it-all, done-it-all bravado so characteristic of his age. The litany came in a tired, not prideful, voice: "Pot, alcohol, LSD, hash, ups and downs, Freon(SS), amyl nitrite(SS).

"I stole to get the money. I stole from my mom. I went through every drawer, like a burglar robbing her. I stole bikes and sold the parts. Anything."

What makes him special is not that he wolfed drugs - our society, said a Cincinnati psychologist, is "totally immersed in drug culture" - but that he gave them up, cold turkey(SS), and is determined to stay clean.

"I feel proud that I don't get high," he said.

He is a 17-year-old student at a Columbus high school. His name is being withheld to protect his privacy. But his story is being told to promote a program that, he maintains and his parents agree, probably saved his life.

It is called Kids Helping Kids. The private, non-profit organization near Cincinnati is 3 years old now, and its long-term treatment has helped 40 young people from the Columbus area kick addictions to drugs and alcohol.

The program is a rigid, no-nonsense approach based on group therapy, peer counseling and, most significantly, personal responsibility. If your life is messed up and you want somebody to blame, the program preaches, look in the mirror.

Impressed with its impact on their kids, a group of Columbus parents hopes(SS) to establish a similar facility here called Kidscope. They need almost \$200,000 to do that. They have raised about \$20,000 so far, not including a \$60,000 matching grant offered earlier this month by the Columbus Foundation. Kidscope's organizers want it up and running by June 1.

"This particular treatment is important for one reason: It works," said Jan Miller, the Cincinnati psychologist who believes that ours is a dangerously drug-ridden age. A former staff member of Kids Helping Kids, Miller now works as a consultant for the Kidscope project.

"This is a grass-roots(SS) thing. The parents have decided they want this," said Miller, a Tennessee native whose mellifluous(SS) accent unbends the stiff edges of his message. "Seeing your child destroy himself right before your eyes is not an easy thing."

Nor is altering behavior that the whole world says is OK, Miller noted. "We're a society that tolerates chemical dependency," he said. Excessive alcohol consumption is seen as cute, as manly. And drugs? Drugs are cool. Drugs are hip. That's what movies and television shows say, anyhow, in subtle or not-so-subtle ways.

The result, Miller said, is a generation of young people that regards mood-changing chemicals as symbols of maturity, as attractive rites of passage. And for some of them "the chemicals are poison," Miller said. They get hooked. Then their parents get wise. Then everybody gets scared.

Kidscope will treat approximately 50 kids, ages 12 to 21, its first year, and 125 to 150 kids annually thereafter, Miller said. Like its Cincinnati counterpart, it will be based on a multistep(SS) recovery model that owes a considerable debt to Alcoholics Anonymous, he said. The phases focus on different aspects of an individual's life, including self, family, education and occupation, friendship and leisure time, and sharing. Like AA, the program insists on complete abstinence. No tapering off.

"Even a child has to accept responsibility for his or her own sobriety," Miller said. "There's every excuse in the world for drug and alcohol use. We stress peer involvement, so we'll have 50 other kids there who say, 'We've heard it all, and we won't buy it.' "

Other drug and alcohol treatment programs don't work for adolescents, Miller said, because they don't last long enough and they don't feature kids as counselors. Kids con adults, he believes.

The average length of stay at Kids Helping Kids is approximately one year, said Penny Walker, executive director. For the first two to

three months, newcomers undergo 10-hour days of group therapy and self-examination. They must live in special host homes, and they are kept under 24-hour surveillance until they prove they can be trusted, Walker said.

Although clients miss school during the program's first phase, and many fall a year behind their classmates, most already are chronic truants because of their drug use, she said. When they return to school, teachers are amazed at their improved behavior, Walker added.

Teen-agers who are further along in the program are assigned to escort newcomers, and escort they do - everywhere. At night, throughout the day, even in the shower, the veteran is attached to the newcomer by a rope tied to the latter's belt.

It sounds drastic, but it works, Walker said. Although a more thorough survey is under way, preliminary studies indicate that after a year, about 70 percent of those who finish the program haven't returned to alcohol or drugs, she said. Those figures are far rosier than statistics from other treatment facilities, Walker and Miller said.

The program also requires honest - sometimes painfully honest - communication between parents and children. Once a week, family members must confront one another at open meetings. They discuss past behavior and their feelings about that behavior. The result often is highly emotional, but ultimately healing, participants said.

Sally Thomson(SS), an Upper Arlington resident who coordinates fund raising for Kidscope, said the program is all too necessary in central Ohio. "I'm continually amazed at how many people need it," she said, citing the families who for years now have been making weekly trips to the Cincinnati facility.

Once those trips are over, though, another journey commences. It is as tough, in some ways, as the initial escape from drugs and alcohol. Kids who finish the program must return to their homes and schools - to the same places where drug use began and flourished.

There they face a sticky, critical time. Naturally, parents sometimes want to ease things by just moving away. New school, new friends, new start. But moving is no answer, Walker said. The poet Horace had a line on that: You can change your skies, he wrote, but you can't change your soul.

"It's scary," said the 17-year-old Columbus high school student, who has been home several weeks now. "It's strange to be back in the whole atmosphere."

His former "druggie" companions - the adjective is his - are all around him. Some have already approached him. Everybody knows where he's been during the past year; news travels through the average high school at speeds that would intrigue NASA.

"I was walking home today and some guys said, 'You want to get high?' I said, 'No.' It's normal. It's going to come up.

"I was tempted. But I'm determined not to get high. That's the hardest thing, though. Getting back in the swing of things. Letting people know where I'm at, and hoping they respect it."

He keeps in close touch with other teen-agers from the Kids Helping Kids program. A counselor at his school has proved(SS) to be a good listener. "I need all the support I can get."

He would like to be an architect someday, or a draftsman. His favorite movie star is Clint Eastwood. He likes to camp in the woods, ride motorbikes. He likes to use drugs and drink, too, but he can't. Ever.

"I can't touch it. If I do, I can't make it." Kids Helping Kids taught him that, he said.

Here is what his mother said: "All I know is that if it weren't for this program, my son would be dead now. It saved his life. And that saved mine."

For information on Kidscope, write P.O. Box 272088, Columbus 43227.

• **Caption:** PHOTO, GRAPHICDispatch photo illustration by Will Blanton

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