

## THE BURDETTE FAMILY'S STORY: FROM HELL OF THE WORLD OF DRUGS TO RECOVERY

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For millions of young Americans in the late 1960s and early '70s, drugs were as much a part of lives as sex, rock music and protest marches.

The world has changed dramatically since then. In today's conservative climate, drugs might seem as passe as "love beads" and long hair.

But the experts - researchers, psychiatrists, drug counselors - say the opposite is true: Teen-age drug and alcohol abuse remains a problem of crisis proportions.

It's a problem that affects rich families, poor families and ones in between. It's a problem in Kentucky, in Lexington - perhaps in your neighborhood.

Today, in the first of a three-part series, Herald-Leader staff writer Susan White tells the story of Rick ██████████, whose drug habit almost destroyed his family. On Page A14, White reports what the "experts" say about drug and alcohol abuse.

Monday: Programs that treat young drug and alcohol abusers.

Tuesday: Some things parents and the community can do to prevent drug and alcohol abuse and make people more aware of the problem.

In his crisp khaki trousers, blue shirt and navy tie, Rick ██████████ looks like every mother's idea of the perfect son.

He is handsome and intelligent, with a solid marriage and a 2-year-old son. He is also close to his parents, so close that the three of them feel comfortable hugging one another in front of a newspaper photographer's flashing camera.

But during Rick's teen-age years in Lexington, he slipped into a drug culture that almost destroyed his family. The story of his descent into that nightmarish world - a world most parents prefer to believe can't touch "good" families like theirs - is a tragic one, the kind that most people would prefer to keep hidden from even their most intimate friends.

The ██████████ are an exception, however. Rick, now 25 and a full-time counselor in a Lexington drug-treatment program, is reminded of his former self every time he sees a teen-ager who has become dependent on drugs or alcohol. And he and his parents, Jack and Mary Ann ██████████, are willing to publicize the painful details of Rick's past because they want Central Kentuckians to open their eyes to the continuing problem of teen-age drug and alcohol abuse.

"People here feel it happens in other places and not in our town," Rick ██████████ said last week. "There's a big drug problem here."

Jack and Mary Ann ██████████, both prominent Lexington residents, never imagined that they would discover a drug problem under their own roof.

"There was a time when I thought this sort of thing only happened to people who weren't good parents," Mrs. ██████████ said before she, her husband and Rick gathered recently in the family's west Lexington home to begin telling their story. "It was really very humbling when it happened to us. I sometimes think one of the reasons God allowed us to go through this was so we could tell other people. . . ."

It was in 1974, during the first of Mrs. ██████████ three terms on the Fayette County school board, that she and her husband learned that Rick, then 14, was using drugs. They were called before the safety and security board at Beaumont Junior High School, where Rick had exploded a homemade firecracker. School officials suspected drugs were involved, even though Rick had hidden his stash of marijuana in a friend's locker.

"I could have sworn my son was not using drugs," Mrs. ██████████ recalled. "When she (the school security officer) told me, I could have died. I could have just died. I felt like my whole life had fallen apart."

Her husband, who is director of planning, engineering and construction for Kentucky Utilities Co. Inc., was not quite as distraught.

"I told myself he was just being a boy, and boys will make firecrackers," ██████ said, shaking his head at his own naivete. "We rationalized again. We told ourselves our son wasn't heavily into drugs, and we put it behind us."

Like so many other parents, the ██████ shielded themselves from reality with a series of convincing arguments. They were a close-knit family. They went to church regularly. They had invested time and love in their son. And they had supplied him with all the possessions that an upper-middle-class child could want.

Buoyed by these facts, they managed to convince themselves that Rick's use of marijuana had been nothing more than a "passing phase."

In reality, though, Rick had no intention of giving up what was then a pleasant recreation. He "got high" several times a week during junior high school. His grades were not quite as good as they had been in elementary school, but they were still above average. As far as Rick was concerned, his drug use had no side effects.

But Rick's carefree experiences in junior high school were just the beginning of his - and his family's - descent into the grimmest experience of their lives.

"When I went to high school, I went to get high," he said. "I knew where those people were, and I went to them - and I wasn't in the minority. I didn't hang around with 'straight' people because I felt guilty, and because we didn't have anything in common.

"To be accepted by people who had good grades took a lot of work, and I thought I could never do it. I thought I could do drugs, and those people were willing to accept me, to use me."

When he was with friends, Rick recalled, "doing drugs was the central thing. If we went to a ball game, we never saw the game. We got high."

There were times, he said, "when I tried to get straight, but there were always people asking me to keg parties. There were parties out in a field with hundreds of people, most of them from school. There was a lot of pressure."

"At the time it seemed like a majority of the kids drank and got high," he said.

By Rick's sophomore year, "I was high every day; I was experimenting with different drugs; I was selling drugs. I used cocaine, acid, speed - toward the end I started inhaling lacquer thinner. It was cheap - I could hallucinate with it - and when my parents smelled it I could say I'd been working in the garage.

"By this time I looked like a full-fledged druggie. I was living up to the image. I was dirty. I wore an old Army jacket."

It became impossible for Rick's parents to ignore the severity of his problem. Mrs. ██████ went to Guy Potts, then Fayette County's superintendent of schools, and offered to resign.

"I wasn't sure it was right for me to represent the people," she said softly. "There were times when I would have to go to an expulsion hearing, and I would think, 'How can I make a good decision, when I have a child of my own who's doing the same thing this one is doing?' "

She said that Potts advised her not to resign because her personal experiences might help her understand other parents whose children were involved in drugs.

██████ volunteered to resign as an elder at Southland Christian Church but, for much the same reason, his resignation was rejected, too.

Meanwhile, Rick's life slid into disarray.

He drank three pints of whiskey one afternoon, then wrapped his sports car around a mail truck parked in front of Lafayette High School. He was not injured, but when the police arrived to arrest him, he fought them off. Finally, subdued, he vomited on the arresting officers, inside their police car.

"Maybe I should have been stronger in disciplining him," his father said, leaning back in his rocking chair. "I see now I gave him way too much freedom."

But it was just natural for the ██████ to be easier on Rick than on their other two children because they had come so close to losing him. When he was 10 years old, Rick accidentally set fire to himself while playing with his brother's chemistry set. His father extinguished the flames with his own hands, but 45 percent of Rick's body was covered with third-degree burns. For several weeks, the ██████ didn't know if Rick would live or die.

The burns, some of them still faintly visible on Rick's face, didn't cause him to use drugs, he said. Instead, it was peer pressure.

"I wanted to continue my friendship with my best friend, and at the time there wasn't any price to pay," he said. "All I felt was that I got high and it felt good. I didn't see the repercussions until three years down the line . . . and by that time it was too late."

Rick said that he had easy access to any kind of drug he wanted during those years. To pay for his habit he bought drugs from one friend and sold them for almost triple the price to other kids. He also shoplifted and stole money from his parents or his brother.

"I felt a whole lot of loneliness," he said. "If I couldn't find anyone to get high with at school, I'd go get high by myself. I got to the point where every day that I got up was just hell. I didn't want to deal with the guilt, with all the crap that was built up inside me. I lived in a world full of shadows, and every day was dark."

"I thought about doing a lot of things," he said. "I thought about running my car off the road. My mind wasn't functioning. I couldn't remember anything."

His parents, in the meantime, were coping with the problem as best they could. "He had just about destroyed our family," his father said. "I'd still occasionally take him into my arms and he'd cry, and I'd cry, and I'd read Scriptures to him, particularly the 100th Psalm."

"I don't remember that," Rick broke in quietly.

"I do," his father went on. "Because I was hanging on by my toenails."

"This is where Ann and I started going through hell," ██████ said. "We didn't know where to go, or how to get help."

A crisis came just before Christmas in 1977, when Mrs. ██████ caught Rick at home with a pound of marijuana on the coffee table. He grabbed his supply, ran out the door and headed for Ohio with a friend.

"I didn't sleep for a week," Mrs. ██████ said. "I was afraid to leave the house, afraid I wouldn't be there if he called."

"With the kind of weather we were having I could just imagine him lying somewhere dead," ██████ said. "I had almost given up hope. When he finally phoned it was almost like a voice from the grave for me."

When Rick finally returned to Lexington he was shaken by the experience - but not enough to stop using drugs. The turning point came four months later, when he celebrated his 17th birthday by going camping with his best friend.

On the way home they picked up a hitchhiker who took them to buy some hashish. Rick began hallucinating, and - for the first time - he was really frightened.

"It scared me so bad, seeing how big a hold they (drugs) had on me," he said. "I was paralyzed with fear."

At 3 a.m. he reached home, ringing the doorbell to awaken his parents.

"I told my mother, 'My life is going down the drain,' " Rick said. "That night we got down on our knees and prayed together."

At that point, without any formal treatment, Rick began moving toward a life free of drugs. He returned to Lafayette High School, where his former friends quickly labeled him a "narc" and other students still considered him a "druggie." When he left class he would sometimes find that his car tires had been cut or that the windshield had been smashed.

Occasionally he had frightening flashbacks, which he attributed to the inhalants he had been using. He was also shocked to learn that he had suffered some short-term memory loss. That year was one of the most difficult periods of his life, he said, and he took refuge in drugs at least six or eight more times.

"It wasn't like I went to sleep a druggie and woke up the next day straight," he said. "I was having to pay the price for what I had done."

But with the support of his strong faith in God - he says he is alive today because Jesus Christ changed his life - as well as the support of his parents and some friends, Rick managed to graduate with an A average for his senior year. Then he went on to Johnson Bible College in Knoxville, where he was valedictorian and president of his class.

"There was a time when I didn't want to claim him," Rick's mother said with a proud smile in his direction.

"Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it," his father said. "That's one of the hardest things to remember."

Rick, who has led a drug-free life for seven years, was minister of Bedford Acres Christian Church in Paris until January. He left to become a counselor with Possibilities Unlimited, a drug rehabilitation program in Lexington, because he wanted to give today's troubled teen-agers the benefit of his own experience - "the hell" he went through on drugs.

The [REDACTED] family is close again, perhaps even closer than in Rick's pre- drug days. "It did not tear us apart," [REDACTED] said firmly, looking at his wife of 43 years. "I didn't blame Ann and she didn't blame me and we didn't blame Rick."

"Sometimes I think we went through all those things because my eyes had to be opened," said Mrs. [REDACTED], a Possibilities Unlimited board member. She and her son spend much of their time warning community groups that the drug problem is still very real.

She tells them that she is sure of her facts - she is speaking from experience.

- Caption: PHOTO Color Herald-Leader/David Perry Jack, left, Rick and Mary Ann [REDACTED] " . . . I thought this . . . happened to people who weren't good parents."
- Memo: Teen-agers and drugs series: The problem today

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