

How One Family Handled Drug Abuse

By JESSICA SULLIVAN
Star Living Section Editor

Tom and Joyce Tobias of Annandale told members of the local Kids Are Our Concern organization how they handled the drug and alcohol problem of their older sons and grew in strength as a family.

The Tobiases addressed the Wednesday night meeting of KAOC at the Amherst Campus of James Wood High School. Mrs. Tobias organized PANDAA (Parents' Association to Neutralize Drugs and Alcohol Abuse) in Fairfax County, which is said to be the largest group of its kind in Virginia.

TOM TOBIAS profiled his family of seven children. When he and his wife discovered that their two oldest sons were involved with drugs and alcohol in December 1979, they read books, became strict, then lenient. They gave their sons more attention, then less attention. They made restrictions, handed out privileges, supervised them, lectured them, and even formed a parent peer group.

They went to family counseling. With each new approach, the problem seemed to improve—for a while. But as the oldest son went off to college and the other entered his senior year in high school, the abuse continued and became more prevalent.

The Tobiases eventually took their sons to Straight, Inc., in Florida, a long-term drug rehabilitation program. Both sons signed themselves into the program and are undergoing intensive therapy.

"WE THOUGHT when our boys entered high school the scene was the same as when we went to school," Tobias said. "It's quite a different scene."

Before their children's involvement with drugs and alcohol, the Tobias family was the picture of family

togetherness. As the two older boys began experimenting with drugs and alcohol, communication with other family members lessened and problems with school, the police, and the family erupted.

"I felt hopeless, desperate, and confused," Mrs. Tobias said. "I didn't understand what was going on."

She said her youngest son would sometimes stop drinking and using drugs for days, but could not remain in a drug-free state. Tests showed he was a borderline alcoholic.

"During the winter he frequently asked me to help him with his calculus," Tobias said. "It became obvious to me that he didn't mentally function very well. I could see he was going downhill quickly."

In March, just months before he was to graduate from high school, the Tobiases took their son out of school and traveled to Florida to encourage him to sign himself into the program. He eventually graduated from high school via a correspondence course.

MRS. TOBIAS spent three months in Florida with her son, and serving as a foster mother for other young people enrolled in the program.

"It's hard to get straight," she said. "And it takes a long time. I know that when my kids get out of the program, it's going to be hard for them to stay straight."

During the family turmoil of dealing with the problem, Mrs. Tobias said a lot of friction developed between her and her husband. "We were having a lot of disagreements which we never had before. We accused each other of being too soft, too strict . . ."

She said they both did a lot of crying

and lived in fear that the older son would introduce the younger children to marijuana.

"Our family was sick," she said.

Mrs. Tobias said "druggie" kids are very good at splitting up homes. She said some of them make a real effort at it and then choose to go with the parent

who is more lenient.

Since Straight, Inc., came into the Tobias' family life, all family members have attended "rap" sessions, which included the younger brothers and sisters.

"IN LOOKING back, I try to think of the signs that were there if I had the awareness," Mrs. Tobias said.

She recalled that her one son became rebellious and lazy, and did not like to be with the family. "He thought we were prudes," she said. "He slept a lot and was difficult to wake up. There were dramatic behavior changes."

She said she found screens like those in a kitchen faucet and thought they were from her washing machine. She said the screens are used as filters for marijuana pipes.

"I found a lot of burnt matches," she said. "I learned after that that it's hard to light marijuana."

Mrs. Tobias said her sons were "drugging" for three years before she and her husband found out. "This is not unusual," she said. "Like a lot of kids, they were able to run a dual life."

She said one of her sons told her that he has used marijuana, uppers, downers, cocaine, LSD, laughing gas, "everything you can think of."

The couple said alcohol is a number one problem and getting a lot more serious. Mrs. Tobias said kids are learning that if they combine alcohol and marijuana they don't throw up since the THC chemical in marijuana suppresses nausea.

"A lot of kids of ODing (overdosing) on alcohol nowadays," she said.

THE TOBIASES fielded numerous questions from the audience after their two-hour presentation. Many were about the Straight program, which costs \$2,100 despite the length of time needed for rehabilitation, be it nine months or

three years. There is a monthly food fee of around \$35. The program has been in existence for five years. Minors in the program must voluntarily sign themselves in.

"There's so much caring there you can't believe it," Mrs. Tobias said.

"Best of all, our sons like themselves and their family," Mrs. Tobias said. "They wear a smile on their face and have a beautiful glow in their eyes. They are proud to be straight and are anxious to help others by relating our family story."

One teacher at the meeting asked the couple how they would have reacted if a teacher told them their son was on drugs. She said she can smell marijuana smoke of some of her students, but has hesitated to confront the parents for fear of a lawsuit.

Col. James Longerbeam, president of KAOC, said there is a law that gives teachers immunity if they report to authorities a student suspected of using drugs.

Section 8.01-47 of the state code says:

"In addition to any other immunity he may have, any teacher, instructor, principal, school administrator, school coordinator, guidance counselor or any other professional or administrative staff member of any elementary or secondary school, or institute of higher learning who, in good faith without probable cause and without malice, acts to report, investigate or cause any investigation to be made into the activities of any student or students or any person or persons as they relate to alcohol or drug use or abuse in or related to the school or institution on activity, shall be immune from all civil liability that might otherwise be incurred or imposed as the result of the making of such a report, investigation, or disclosure."



Star Photo by Jessica Sullivan

Tom and Joyce Tobias at last Wednesday night's meeting of Kids Are Our Concern.