

THE WAR ON DRUGS 'Good kid' doing well on the long road back

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A Special Report - RED RIBBON WEEK.

Also supplement to the South County edition of the Evening Bulletin.

Blessing on thee, little man

Barefoot boy, with cheek of tan]

- John Greenleaf Whittier

He is 16 now - no longer the "little man" of four years ago who opened a floodgate of drug-related misery that nearly drowned not just him but his mother as well.

He lives in a middle-class South County neighborhood, attends a public high school and works hard to keep a B average.

Growing tall and lean these days, he's a handsome, ruddy-cheeked kid who's the picture of Whittier's idealized "barefoot boy" - and indeed, he greeted me casually barefoot as he and his mother sat down in their living room to tell a frightful tale whose final chapter is still unwritten.

To the average parent, and I am one, this is a nightmare. To the average kid, I suspect it's no less.

Here's a boy whose nights are full - he studies, practices blues guitar - and goes four or five times a week to meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous.

His mother, a professional woman who holds a master's degree, goes to Al-Anon - the program for people whose lives are affected by the drinking of family members.

The boy says that all this began with a dreadful atmosphere at home.

Parents were feuding

His parents were feuding and domestic life was frantic; finally, the couple separated and their two sons stayed half-time with each parent. Then the father, also a young professional with a Ph.D, died unexpectedly.

"I was good at pushing aside how I felt," the boy told me. "I kept my feelings inside - then they tumbled out."

They tumbled out beginning in the seventh grade with marijuana use that escalated in the eighth grade to "tons of drugs - I was doing LSD, PCP's, and I was even selling it. I was the biggest user in school."

Mostly, the drugs were bought in Providence, at clubs frequented by some of his older acquaintances, he said.

He drank, too; today he still considers himself an alcoholic who would slip back to the old ways without support and understanding from his mother and from AA.

When help first came it was nearly too late. His young life bottomed out in an overdose at home one day after school; his friends had left, he was there alone, and "I lost it after a lot of drugs and drinking. I wiggled out. I couldn't think, and I could barely talk."

But he could think enough to call his older brother, who sped home from work and drove him to the hospital.

His mother, herself a child of the '60s who openly smoked marijuana at home when her children were young, says she deluded herself about her son's habits, ignoring obvious evidence - including the pipe she once found on a kitchen counter.

Explaining how he defused potential confrontations when she did ask questions, the boy said: "I would lie, and whimper, and cry."

"And I would believe his lies," said his mother.

'Zero communication'

Of her troubled little family, she remembers that "We became dysfunctional. The communications department was a big zero."

Like her son, she, too, holds her feelings inside - a legacy, she says, of her own father's brutality to her and her mother.

But there were feelings aplenty on the day she rushed to the hospital so fearful for her son: "When I saw him lying there on the gurney, I knew I had to do something."

What followed was an \$8,000, 13-month enrollment at Straight of New England Inc., a rehabilitation center in Stoughton, Mass., that involves an addict's entire family in the recovery program.

School was put on hold. Friendships were put on hold, many of them never to be renewed. A mother's life was put on hold as she balanced work and new expenses with two and three trips a week to the treatment center.

When he returned to school - high school now - our barefoot boy faced a terrible truth about himself: Some students had reputations as athletes, and others were known for their academic achievements or their winning personalities.

"I was known as the school druggie - a person with a negative identity."

It hurt - so badly that he couldn't face it. He dropped out, opting for a tutor to prepare him for a fresh start with his classmates the following year.

He says that "everybody in school" knows of his problems, and that many students are rooting for him to make good. Sometimes, at house parties where liquor is available - and he says it's almost always available - he benefits from reverse peer pressure: "A lot of kids would be angry at me if I took a drink."

These days, he never does. But he says that he's far from out of the woods clinically and socially.

He worries about finding the strength to avoid a backslide. And even though he senses support from schoolmates, he says wistfully that "I feel separate sometimes."

His mother is regretful for what she could have done and didn't do, but realizes that what is past is past. Now, she takes pride in what she accomplished for her son when she did act, has joined a substance abuse task force in her town, and hopes that her story will help other parents confront disquieting truths.

Don't look the other way," she says. If you have suspicions, be resolute in asking questions.

Most of all, she says, if your fears turn out to be justified, don't deny your child love and support just when he needs you most.

Her son agrees with this, asserting that "There's no such thing as a bad kid. There are just kids with problems."

Says his mother: "He was a good kid - a good kid doing bad things."

She says that if she's learned anything from her own drug experiences and from her son's, it's this:

"If there is pain in your life and you use drugs to make you feel better, you have two problems: You've got the pain and you've got the drugs."

Today, good things are high on her son's mind - especially keeping his grades up and getting into college.

What he needs to do right now, he says, is to keep thinking that "while I'm not a model kid, I do my best; I have to realize that I am still a kid - that I'm still growing, and still learning."

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