

TEENS GET CLEAN AND SOBER BY GOING S T R A I G H T

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The day Alice called the police to have her son arrested for stealing her 10-speed bike was the day she decided to take charge.

"I had a gut feeling he took the bike and sold it for drugs. I told him, 'You're out. You may not live in my house again.'"

That was when Mike was 16. Today, at age 18, he is in treatment at STRAIGHT Inc. in Springfield, Va., a national drug treatment program for adolescents and their families that will open a facility this summer in Chesapeake. Currently, about 70 Hampton Roads' families have youngsters in the Springfield program.

Mike is now sober and off drugs. Chaos and despair have been replaced by trust and respect. In this story, Mike's name and the names of his relatives have been changed to protect their privacy.

The boy had stolen his mother's bike to help finance a five-year habit that included alcohol, pot, LSD and trash drugs like paint fumes. He also was taking pocket change off the dresser from his father, Bob. He had ripped off money his sister, Susan, had raised for a school project.

A kid on drugs is a great con artist, Alice says. "He would cry, 'I can't believe you think I would do that.' It tore your heart out. Finally, I didn't believe anything he said."

Alice and Bob had their son arrested for taking the bicycle, and held in detention. The family, which lives on the Peninsula, followed a friend's recommendation and researched STRAIGHT. Then they drove to Springfield with Mike for a family evaluation and admitted him to the program.

They already had tried other programs for troubled adolescents; the first time he was hospitalized for three months, the second time for 30 days. STRAIGHT provides treatment that lasts an average of a year, though Mike is still in the program after 18 months.

"I just decided that a way of life you've spent years learning, you're not going to unlearn in 30 days," says Bob.

STRAIGHT is a five-phase program, with each phase bringing the youngster closer to resuming normal life in the community. The intensive therapy with mental health professionals includes use of the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

It's also a family-oriented program.

"You don't just drop the kids off and say, 'Fix them,'" explains Alice. "Parents are involved. You learn that drugs affect the entire family. In the parent support group, you learn the different roles that let the problem continue."

A sibling support group also exists, with the youngsters first checked out to make sure they're not involved in drugs, says Alice. A primary aim of the group is to prevent future drug users.

BOB DESCRIBES HIS SON as a physically late maturer who succumbed to negative peer pressure. He lacked self-confidence and craved acceptance, which he found among older teens.

"Mike learned to use drugs as a coping mechanism. When he felt bad or inadequate, he had a way of escaping it," says Bob.

The boy began sneaking beer two-liter bottles of wine coolers. Smoking pot had become part of his daily routine.

Mike was failing courses, skipping school and sometimes staying out all night. Money started disappearing. He was put on probation for possession of a joint and forging a check.

His parents put Mike on restriction or made the telephone off limits for bad grades, truancy or breaking curfew. "Ultimately, it was impossible to restrict him without restricting ourselves," says Bob.

"The reason I had him arrested was that it was perfectly clear there was absolutely nothing I could do to make him mind. I really just feared for his life," says Alice.

Adds Bob, "We had to contain him; we had to have a place where he was safe and warm and dry. There was a feeling of hopelessness.

Every parent has his bag of tricks, but nothing helped. The mood swings and the loss of self-esteem associated with drug abuse end up controlling these kids more than the parents can."

BOB SAYS HE AND HIS WIFE felt devastated after taking Mike to Springfield.

"We stopped at this crummy little restaurant on the way home. I don't think we even knew what to say to each other. There was a feeling of shock. But there was a sense of relief," Bob admits. "I had alleviated the immediate problem of coping with this person who was totally out of control. But there was a sense of guilt and anxiety. Had we done the right thing?"

Bob had grown "distrustful" of the mental health profession after Mike's previous hospitalizations failed to solve his problems. "I thought, this was probably some other song and dance."

At STRAIGHT, teens talk openly about their "druggie" behavior and play a crucial part in each other's recovery. They are role models and authority figures, "oldcomers" challenging "newcomers" to stay straight and move on through treatment.

A youngster who is physically dependent on drugs goes through withdrawal before starting the STRAIGHT program. Instead of a hospital setting, youngsters are placed with host families who have a son or daughter further along in the program.

Those in the Springfield program attend therapy and rap sessions in the STRAIGHT building, returning to their host families at night. Host family homes have an alarm system; knives and medicines are kept under lock and key.

"The rules are very rigid and they're enforced. Most of the kids are used to manipulating," says Bob.

As a newcomer, Mike says he missed getting high and being able to do what he wanted. He could not speak to other "newcomers". In the STRAIGHT treatment building, he was accompanied everywhere - even to the bathroom - by an "oldcomer," who held onto his belt loops so he couldn't bolt.

"I don't know that STRAIGHT's 100 percent without controversy," Bob says (see accompanying story). However, he and Alice consider the regulations safeguards against the kids running away.

Mike was really lonely for his family, but family involvement is a privilege STRAIGHT youngsters earn. Bob, Alice and Susan couldn't write or speak privately to him until he made it through first phase, usually a two-month period reserved for kids to face the fact they have a problem and a time for parents to start their own healing process.

It was almost eight months until Mike made "coming home." For youngsters with family in the community, that means returning home to live. For Mike, it was a weekend at a Springfield motel with his parents and sister.

"Mike feels he's never completed anything," says Alice. "He wants to graduate from STRAIGHT because the program is so hard. That in itself will give him a sense of real accomplishment."

BOB, ALICE AND SUSAN ATTEND weekly support group meetings in Virginia Beach at the STRAIGHT Family Service Center, which serves about 70 Tidewater families with youngsters in Springfield. They also are required to attend two Springfield meetings a month.

Susan has regained a new closeness with her brother. Alice and Bob are learning to stop berating themselves. "For probably three months, I had a deep-seated feeling that I was a failure as a mother," Alice says.

"I blamed myself; I should have been able to spot that my son was involved in this activity," adds Bob. "It is a definite relief to have others who have shared similar experiences and to get through with 'Oh, I was a horrible parent.' It really helped me to see there are other parents who were pretty normal and who had the same kind of problem."

They have learned they are responsible for their behavior, not Mike's. "Nobody really can control a teen-ager who doesn't want to be controlled," says Bob.

Instead of visiting with Mike in a motel when they come to Springfield, Bob and Alice have rented an apartment across from STRAIGHT with four other families. For six months, Alice has taken her turn as the housemother a couple of days a week. Bob occasionally uses personal leave days from his job to be the father of the house. They say the arrangement simulates realistic family life better than staying in a motel.

If Mike is making progress in therapy, he is one of the nine boys housed in the apartment. If he's on a "refresher" because he's relapsed to an earlier phase, he lives with another host family.

Mike is in third phase now, easing back into the community and the reality of peer pressure to revert to former behavior. He is dividing his time between a job at a Springfield store and treatment; he is staying clean. He hopes to pass his high school equivalency exam when he returns home.

"It's great to have a relationship with my son again," says Bob. "I've told him how proud I am he's making progress. It's great to have a good family relationship again.

"I cannot say with 100 percent certainty what will happen to my son tomorrow. I don't think anybody can. My hope for Mike is that he can lead a contented, productive life and maintain his sobriety. Without the last one, he'll never have the other two."

* The closest STRAIGHT treatment center, serving about 70 Hampton Roads families, is in Springfield, Va.; call (703) 642-1980. Local support for these families is provided at STRAIGHT's Virginia Beach Family Service Center at 499-9111.

Treatment costs between \$11,000 and \$12,000 a year, depending on the area. Host family charges in Springfield run an additional \$7 or so a day. Some insurance programs help defray costs.

- Caption: Staff photos (b&w) by SCOTT DEMUSY When parents and children get to visit, there is always a lot of hugging. Here, Alice and Bob embrace their son at a rehabilitation meeting. Visitors ask questions and listen during a small group session. Staff photo illustration (b&w) by DENNIS TENNANT Silhouette of youth
- Memo: This is part of The Family Notebook 1989

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