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No, not my kid: Middle-class, small-town family learns to deal with teen's drug addictions

By Michael Blankenheim
Times Staff Writer

It is difficult to say what the low point was for 17-year-old recovering heroin addict Jim and his parents, Harry and Susan.

There were so many.

There were Jim's constant disappearances at 2, 3 or 4 in the morning to get drugs and get high.

"When your kid disappears in the middle of the night like that in Westminster, there's not a whole lot you can really do," said Harry, 44.

There was the first time Harry and Susan had Jim arrested.

"When it's a life or death issue, getting arrested looks awfully good," said Susan, 46.

And then there was Jim stealing personal items from his parents and his brother and hocking them to pay for drugs, or the bank accounts mysteriously dwindling.

"Kids in general don't want to hurt their parents or the rest of their family," Susan said. "My son didn't wish us any ill will, but he has stolen from all of us."

The stealing was a shockwave that vibrated deep within this middle-class family. It became the absolute realization that the standard denial of "no, not my kid" was laughable when applied to them.

At 15, Jim was a full-fledged drug addict.

"When you're doing the stealing, you don't really care who you might hurt," Jim said. "Caring is in the back of your mind a little, but getting the money to get high is what's important. Later on, when you're not high, that's when you feel guilty. But then you're already starting to think about getting high again."

"I used to smoke a joint once in a while. Now I don't do those things, because I need to set an example for my son."

-- Harry
Father of a teen heroin addict

A progression: No problem getting booze, then later drugs

Jim requested that his and his parents' real names not be used. "I don't want to get my ass kicked," he said. "A lot of the people from my old days are still in town walking on the streets."

At 12, Jim began experimenting with beer and pot.

"When you're doing it that way — just a little — you're partying with people," Jim said. "You're having fun with your friends."

Quite often, Jim didn't have to pay for drugs or beer. Other teens got them for him. "It's no problem for young kids to get that in Westminster," Jim said. "If pot isn't around, there's almost always someone old enough to buy beer. It gets passed down from person to person until the younger kids get it."

Harry and Susan said they didn't notice their son's substance abuse at first. Now, the signs of teen drug abuse are familiar, unwelcome acquaintances to the couple. But back then, they didn't know how to add them up.

Or, perhaps, they may not have wanted to, Harry said.

"Realizing your kid is on drugs is usually the last thing on your mind," he said. "Most parents just don't accept it. The changes don't happen all at once, so you might not notice them because you see your kid every day. The first time is difficult to detect. They might do it 50 times before you start to notice."

Jim said he enjoyed drinking beer and smoking pot with his friends so much he began using other drugs with them. As he mixed those up with LSD and cocaine, his drug use became obvious.

He missed classes at school. He started ignoring the family pets he once cherished. He became secretive. If he was at home, he was either on the telephone speaking in hushed tones or in his bedroom. He began staying up all night and sleeping all day.

"Kids never want their parents listening in on their phone conversations," Harry said. "But every call became secretive; every call was furtive."

Then Jim tried a drug that made everything worse—much worse.

Crack cocaine.

"With crack, you're not doing it to party anymore," Jim said. "It's not a social thing. You're doing it to get high, because you want to get high and need to get high."

Susan said that in a short time she saw her son change from a healthy-looking young man to a sickly being who walked around with greasy hair and a blanket over his head.

"He didn't realize how he looked when he was on crack cocaine," she said. "He couldn't see himself for what he was."

That was at 15.

Jim then began experimenting with heroin. Looking back on it now, he has difficulty explaining why he made the switch from crack cocaine to heroin.

“Crack makes you bounce off the walls; heroin just makes you lay back and say ‘heyyy,’ ” Jim said.

The amounts stolen from his family became larger. The amount of time Jim was gone from home stretched out to days, sometimes weeks. His health and overall physical and mental well-being deteriorated.

“When my son got into hard drugs, the drugs became the first priority,” Harry said.

“The things that were once important to him became less important,” Harry said. “The stealing didn’t stop, and wasn’t going to stop, until we took drastic action.”

Calling the cops on their kid

That drastic action was Harry and Susan calling the Westminster Police and having their 15-year-old son arrested for stealing their car, Harry said.

“Most kids don’t end up facing the consequences because their parents won’t have them arrested,” Harry said. “Eventually, we realized that was the step we had to take.”

Harry and Susan had Jim arrested many times. “The Westminster Police were wonderful,” Susan said. “They helped us save our son’s life.”

Jim’s view of the police is not as benign.

“I think they’re screwed up, but I guess they have to do their job,” he said.

At 16, Jim was sentenced to the Charles H. Hickey Jr. School in Baltimore County, which houses 320 youths who have committed a variety of crimes. While it is called a school, critics contend it is essentially a prison for the young.

“He was at Hickey for six weeks,” Harry said. “It wasn’t a good, gentle place. They have kids there who committed some terrible crimes, including murder.”

But the arrests and time at Hickey gave the legal system the impetus for Jim to be admitted to treatment programs for drug offenders, Susan said.

Four months of being clean

From when he was 15- to 17-years-old, Jim was in five different drug rehab programs. He completed all of them, but relapsed into using after each program.

During the winter and summer of this year, he was in a 60-day residential program. He then spent time in a local halfway house

before returning to his parents’ home. He has been there nearly four months now.

That’s four months of living drug-free back in society — something he hasn’t done for the past five years.

A big step, a big accomplishment in his short life, said his parents. But Harry, Susan and Jim know they must be vigilant against backsliding.

Jim regularly goes to Narcotics Anonymous meetings, and his family continues to work with Junction Inc., a local drug treatment/education program.

“If he goes back to using drugs, we’ll see the changes,” Harry said. “He can’t ever do that. If he did, then he won’t be able to stop. He’d be like a car with no brakes at the top of a hill starting to do down.”

No one knows who will be addicts

When Jim began smoking pot and drinking beer five years ago, he didn’t believe becoming an addict was a possibility.

“I guess kids have to watch themselves, ask themselves, ‘Do I have a problem?’ ” Jim said.

To his parents, the uncertainty about which drug users become addicts and which beer drinkers become alcoholics is the ultimate horror of substance abuse.

“Some people can say ‘I have time to kill, so I’m going to have this beer or smoke that joint. I won’t do it again for months,’ ” Harry said. “For those kinds of people, there won’t be any changes. But for other people, it changes them. They have one beer or joint and it will make them want to get high again and again and again and again...”

“I used to have an occasional beer,” he said. “I used to smoke a joint once in a while. Now I don’t do any of those things, because I need to set an example for my son. I can’t make him stay clean if I’m not clean myself.”

“When you come into this world, you don’t come equipped with a little genetic label saying it’s all right to get high,” Susan said. “We don’t know who is it that can turn it on and off and who is it that will have their life ruined because drugs will make them throw away everything important to them.”