

A Better Life: A Teenager's Story

This summer, Curtis (17) celebrated his 50th day of living without drugs. This is no small achievement for a high schooler who started most school days smoking marijuana and drinking over-the-counter cough syrup. Being sober and happy are big achievements for a young man whose drug use has landed him in court, in detoxification programs, in foster care and in a hospital.

A New Town. A New School

A self-professed "class clown" who grew up in a small town in central Massachusetts, Curtis' life was not always about getting into trouble. A happy child with lots of friends, he loved to play football, baseball, basketball and playstation games. At school, he had a passion for history and English, and was often "the kid raising my hand with the answer," he says

Then, Curtis' family moved to a new town where this once popular kid knew nobody. In an unfamiliar neighborhood and school, Curtis was desperate to fit in and make friends. During the summer of eighth grade, he tried marijuana and became a regular user. His drug use brought him new friends, one of whom provided him with prescription Oxycodone, Vicodin, morphine and valium.

"I didn't see that as a problem," says Curtis. "I just didn't."

High School: Still Trying to Fit In

High school brought another set of friends and drugs, including Ecstasy and over-the-counter cough syrup. Eventually, Curtis' daily drug use got him suspended from school.

By his 17th birthday, Curtis had transferred to another school in the same town. He had also been arrested, hospitalized, admitted to a detoxification facility, placed in foster care and on court probation.

"In the end, all I cared about was getting high," he says.

He was smoking Oxycontin, a narcotic pain reliever which is prescribed for severe, long-term

pain. He weighed 95 pounds.

"Then it got to the point where I had had enough," says Curtis. "I knew I had a problem." He tried to sign himself into drug treatment, but there were no available beds. So he relapsed. One day, when he turned up at school high, he was sent to the hospital by ambulance. This time, Curtis was not discharged from the hospital to his home. Instead, he was referred to the Department of Youth Services (DYS) system and from there admitted to the Adolescent Residential Program in Danvers.

Lots of Surprises in Danvers

Curtis was ready to dislike the Adolescent Residential Treatment Program. "I came here trying to just look good for court," he says.

But then, he noticed that the staff members seemed to really care about him. They worked to make him feel comfortable and welcome. He began to connect with the staff and the other teenage boys in residence. He began to talk about how he felt. And, as part of his education about addiction and recovery, he learned how to recognize and avoid the friends and situations that tempted him to use drugs again.

Once, on a weekend pass home, a friend came by his house and suggested that, just like old times, they both get high. Curtis refused. "Without drugs, we had almost nothing in common. He said I was boring now, so I let him leave my house."

More than once, Curtis has been elected as "client of the week" at the Danvers Adolescent Program. He has also earned the privilege of having his own, single-occupancy room.

A Better Life Ahead

Curtis will graduate from the Adolescent Residential Program in October 2011. In preparation for that graduation date, he has begun to work with the staff to plan for his aftercare. He aims to move to a half-way house program, where he can continue to live a sober lifestyle. He also plans to finish his GED and look for a job. Some day, Curtis would like to combine his love of writing and music to become a music reviewer.

Curtis says: "I'm grateful for being sober. I'm grateful for this better life."

