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One mother, hopeful but realistic, watches son struggle with drug addiction

By R.M.

Special to the Pioneer Press

I'm not sure if my son will be at our Thanksgiving table this year. And, I need him to be. He always helps make the corn bread stuffing.

"Mom! How could you even say something so ridiculous?" my son likely would respond with disbelief.

But it's shaping up to be the hardest thing I've ever expressed to date. While I could never say he's not welcome, it's honest to say his drug addiction is not welcome. He is the son we have always loved and will always love, but he is not the son we have always known.

There are several reasons he might not be there — from the unthinkable (drug-related death or disappearance) to the hopeful (he'll have admitted himself for drug treatment).

He's on his own with his life choices these days. Notice, I didn't say the choice to be addicted. He didn't choose addiction; he is its victim and we are the witnesses.

Hello, I'm the mom of a young-adult addict.

Parents of addicts may feel they are alone and that they've run out of time, but there are more of us out there than most realize, and we've still got time to hope for our children's sobriety and recovery.

At a time when parents should naturally be letting go of their dependent minors and anticipating transition to independent adults, addiction creates unnatural challenges with



letting go. We're caught off guard, perplexed. We seek resources to redefine our roles and responsibilities. We seek community with others who have been there and done that and those who are going through it right now.

Sharing our story is not the downer you might imagine, but rather an opportunity to put it in a positive, accepting perspective while encouraging conversation when it might be easier to pretend our kid isn't an addict.

Let me back up.

SNAPSHOT OF ADDICTION TAKING HOLD

We became concerned about our son during his junior year of high school. His attitude sucked, his interests centered on video gaming and his sleep habits dramatically changed. However, medical professionals and family counselors concluded, "He's a good kid. It's tough growing up."

Just months before his graduation, we started finding evidence of drugs. We confronted him, but during counseling he always downplayed his use. In reality, as we would later learn, he had been getting high five times a day even as he aced ACT tests and sports tournaments.

From high school honor student, varsity sports captain and scholarship recipient, he dabbled in drug dealing, landed in the emergency room and detox, got kicked out of college housing and dropped out of classes.

He went to more counseling and agreed to evaluation but entirely disagreed with the

assessment and flat out rejected treatment by running away from a wilderness facility nine days into the program. He spent the summer living in a storage room and selling his plasma to make ends meet.

THE STORY CONTINUES

Everyone welcomes the story of overcoming addiction and recovery, but this is the story of now as it's unfolding.

Today, he's a 19-year-old with no zest for life, just determination for living as a chronic drug user and no telling what else.

He has a job to support his lifestyle. But to my dismay, he has acknowledged stealing that goes on at his place of employment and that he and co-workers get high during shifts.

His life is not good. He is changing weekly. It's more and more apparent to me the effect of drug use and lifestyle. His clothes are often filthy. His feet stink. He stinks ... or tries to mask it with cologne. He has lost a lot of weight. His teeth have an ugly stain from toking. The way he talks is often agitated. I'm pretty sure he's lonely as his old friends have moved on with their lives.

THANKFUL NONETHELESS

Our son's addiction called into consideration my beliefs and values. It had been a long time since faith and spirituality played a significant role in my life, but if ever there was a good time to reconnect, this was it.

Some things remain a struggle, but I embrace

the journey for what it is and choose my actions and perspective. There have been some incredibly bright spots, including meeting people whom I genuinely admire but might never have met, developing more meaningful relationships with friends and family, reconnecting with a higher power and engaging some of my gifts, including advocacy and writing.

We are grateful for regular contact with our son and opportunities to interact, ever hopeful that he will realize he deserves and can make a better life for himself ... and that he is in our prayers and those of many others who love him.

This is the grace I'll be saying on Thanksgiving:

Great spirit, in this season of Thanksgiving, my blessings are plenty and my hope is eternal. Bless the addicts, their families and friends, who pray they will know brighter days ahead. Days when passion, goodness, potential and wisdom will again guide their lives. Days when there is triumph over addiction. Days when the people we once knew return. Days when they believe we're on their side and would help in any way we could. Days when they will know they always have been and always will be loved.

Peace.

R.M. is a Twin Cities mother who wrote this essay for Thanksgiving. She will continue to chronicle her family's experiences with her son's drug addiction at MinnMoms.com. To find out if her son attended Thanksgiving dinner, check the website.

A Real Mom: The conundrum of the chemically dependent

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Editor's note: R.M. is a Twin Cities mother who will chronicle her family's experiences with her son's drug addiction as a guest columnist here.

I wasn't sure if he would make it, but, yes, our son spent Thanksgiving Day in the suburbs with our family and friends.

He enjoyed the meal, lively conversation, and an afternoon filled with cribbage and an evening of family movies in front of the fireplace.

It was tradition at its finest, if only because we faithfully relied on our most valuable and difficult parenting responsibilities - patience and wisdom of deciding when to speak from the heart or act on opportunity.

For the sake of the holiday and relatives too weary for the truth, all that pleasantness existed because no one commented on the events of the previous week - events so numerous I could barely process a flurry of concern, suspicion, steps forward, steps backward, and an ever-present belief that our son wants and needs help to overcome addiction even when he says otherwise.

Blips on the Parental Radar Screen

Leading up to the holiday, he had been incommunicado. Calls went immediately to voicemail and there was no phone or text activity. Parental radar went off. Something was not right. Professionals whom we regularly consult ordinarily recommended not reacting to addiction behavior, but this time they encouraged us to "CHECK IT OUT!"

I called his work, devastated when they said he had uncharacteristically missed the last couple shifts. Then I really went Columbo by calling the apartment where he said moved in September only to hear what I already suspected was true. He never actually lived there.

There you had it. No communication, no work shifts and no living arrangement.

The guidelines for filing a missing adult specifically call out that chemical dependency does not qualify as "compromised" and so we were on our own. Driving around to places he frequents, we quickly realized that we would just have to wait for him to surface calming ourselves that he'd turn up but also reminding ourselves that this might prompt a step closer for him to get help.

After nearly four days of not hearing from him, finally, a text: "Sorry. Lost my charger." Later, a bitter, middle-of-the-night text: "You have no right to know where I am or what I'm doing." The next day he called home all agitated to say he'd quit his job and that they were mailing his paycheck to the house. (I'm thinking fired is more like it, but the details and facts are hard to discern.)

We patiently recognized the routine and weighed our response, if any.

A Prompt to Say Something

But, we couldn't suppress our concern any longer or not make an effort to remind him that treatment was available and advisable. We called him for lunch, and with Dad seated next to him and Mom on the other side of the table, we put it out there.

During high school these talks always turned into arguments and debates, but we were all more adept at conversing. At first he said we'd ambushed him and proceeded with a litany of how we'd made his life difficult by not letting him live at home, taking away the car and trying to get him to stop using drugs. We patiently reminded him these were the consequences of repeatedly bringing and using drugs in the home and in our car - that he knowingly broke these rules because the drugs mattered more.

Again, he vehemently said no to drug treatment, but this time admitted his life was not going well and was open to exploring some relief.

A few days later he willingly completed paperwork, scheduled an appointment, and agreed that this was a good time to commit to an in-patient mental health program. We were feeling optimistic, and I think he was too.

Seemingly he didn't hold back during the 90-minute intake about his habits and lifestyle - perhaps too honestly.

"They won't take me because I'm chemically dependent." Instead, they recommended several dual-diagnosis MICD (Mental Health Chemical Dependency) programs.

It was the first time he acknowledged himself as chemically dependent. That alone is a small bit of progress. The conundrum is that addiction treatment centers won't take him unless he wants and believes he needs help. The truth of treatment revealed itself, again - it's up to him.

Addicts often go years, even decades before they choose treatment, and those in recovery learn that it is a lifelong commitment. He simply isn't ready. Meanwhile, we patiently wait.

We had said our peace and he'd said his. In many ways, we were grateful to declare a respite on Thanksgiving from serious conversation until a most sobering realization when we drove him back to a house he identified as the place he lives.

After hugs and I love you's, he didn't go in that house. When we circled the block, he was still standing outside.

He noticed us and waved as we drove by. Embarrassed that he'd blown his cover? Ticked that we'd checked up on him? Whatever his wave implied we suspect that he's transient, a common consequence of addiction and all the more reason that we keep the lines of communication open and encourage his participation in family gatherings.

Let's talk

Let me know your thoughts. It was lonely and overwhelming in the early days when this was unfamiliar and we kept it to ourselves. But we are not alone.

In the weeks ahead, let's talk about being a parent of a young-adult addict: Sleepless nights and being distracted, exhausted at work; exploration and action on suspicions; boundary setting; impact on marriage as you try to help your kid and yourself; clichés that capture the conundrum of CD; definitions that defy logic; derailing debates; reactions from relatives; dealing with D.A.R.E when your fifth-grader is living with it in real life; finding support (professional and parent to parent) in expected and unexpected places; and more.

Honoring all things -Anon, I'll keep this column appropriately and respectfully anonymous. Chances are, you could figure out who we are, but our identity is far less important than recognizing yourself, a friend, sibling, coworker or an addict.

Parents of addicts, please take care of yourselves, love your children, have faith, and accept the kind gestures and well wishes of others. Above all, pay attention to blips on the radar trusting when to be patient and when to take action. These are the best opportunities - blessings actually - that can prompt our loved ones away from addiction and toward recovery.

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A Real Mom: What gifts can you give a child with addiction?

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Without hesitating, parents are natural givers. It starts with the miraculous gift of life and continues with gifts of protection, encouragement, sustenance, love, praise, boundaries, hope, strength and more.

We give our best without expectation for anything in return. All the while, we're prone to questioning if we could do better or do more. It is the unwritten code of parenting, the natural order, the way it is. Our parenting report card may not be perfect, but it's all A's for effort. It is our heart that tells us if we've given well, if it's good enough.

When our son was little, it was easy to give gifts that absolutely delighted him emotionally and materially. It showed in his face and in his behavior.

During this season of giving, I'm at a loss what to give our 19-year-old son. Certainly there are things he needs - things we'd ordinarily give him if he was not living a transient, unemployed, addicted lifestyle further exacerbated by deceit and denial. It's far more complicated because material gifts (clothes, food, money and housing) fall within the taboo category of enabling, the major no-no of addiction.

Instead, we give him our prayers daily - actually, multiple times day and night when I wake up at 3 a.m. and wonder if he's warm and safe. We give him our love. We give him our commitment to help. We give him our best wishes. We give him all we've got and we keep trying to come up with something more, something better, something of affirmation and value.

We're learning to give him the freedom and respect to live with the outcomes of addiction and mental health, to own his problems, challenges and choices. This is the gift I understand in my mind but find difficult to reconcile with my heart.

There are other things we have given him that I wish we hadn't, at least not for as long as we did. We gave him benefit of the doubt way too many times. We gave him chances to change, only to be shortchanged by more of the same. We gave him a clean slate more times than he's aware, including paying off substantial debts with the idea that we don't want a poor credit record to hurt him once he gets his life together.

We also forgave him for all we went through the past few years because we finally realized that he didn't do these things on purpose or to us. A combination of drugs and mental health issues has influenced his actions and choices beyond his control.

We've made amends, too, by realizing he is emotionally starved for the comfort and joy that home and family represent. And while we can't give him our trust these days to live in our home, we do welcome him to visit, to curl up in a blanket by the fireplace, to play with his little brother and to hold hands around the table in grace before sharing a home-cooked meal.

Emotional gifts are sustaining but often aren't noticed or appreciated unless these are absent. Material gifts, however, can be just as important because these are physical reminders, even symbols. And this is the season of material gifts, things wrapped up in paper with ribbons and small notions that Santa puts in stockings.

I suggested he put together a Christmas list, so we'll see if he does and whether there are items we can give with good conscience - items we don't think he'd sell or leave unused. The last couple of years, his opened presents would stay unused in a pile on his bedroom floor.

The idyllic mother image in my mind compels me to pile gifts under the tree that will magically trigger a transformation in him from despair to delight, from pessimism to optimism, from stubborn to open minded, from addiction to recovery.

During the gift-opening frenzy, sadly, I know that we'll keep an eye on any cash that his siblings or cousins receive from relatives because our son has had sticky fingers. (Three times in the past year he stole his little brother's wallet full of allowance he'd been saving for an iPod; his older sister has had cash taken from her purse; and, this summer he stole money that his grandmother gave to his cousin for doing chores around her house. Parents of addicts nod their heads, yep, it's part and parcel.)

Any ideas what we should wrap up for him? I know we'll give the gifts that keep on giving - love, commitment, hope - and probably some socks, underwear, gloves, books and favorite candies.

With no job at present, he said he won't be able to give presents this year. It's nice that he wants to give, but we don't expect anything nor do we want something he picked up at the store.

The gift we want is a gift he'll give himself - the gift of help, of sobriety and recovery, of health and happiness.

R.M. is a Twin Cities mother who will chronicle her family's experiences with her son's drug addiction as a guest columnist here.

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A Real Mom: Be vigilant for subtle clues of drug use

R.M.

MinnMoms columnist

My mother used to say that all mothers have eyes in the backs of their heads. When I became a mother, I learned what she meant. If I was in the next room, I knew the exact moment to return to find a little one climbing up on a counter, getting ready to put something in his mouth or about to pull a cord from an outlet.

In addition to knowing what we were about to do even without actually seeing us, my mother was good at warning my siblings and me of eminent dangers. "Don't stick your finger in the outlet - you'll electrocute yourself." The way she'd say it was all loving - it didn't tempt me to try it any way and, if anything, it gave me nightmares just thinking about the possibility. (What an influence! To this day I am still careful with outlets.)



Check the car

Parents are inundated with information on keeping kids safe as youngsters and as young adults. We become good at the obvious, but not so alert to the subtle. So, let's get practical regarding awareness of drug use and abuse.

It's not that we didn't wonder if drugs might be part of what we were observing in our son's behavior, it's just that we didn't find any of the so-called evidence that popular web sites and pamphlets warned of. Instead, we found things that didn't make sense or didn't immediately give pause. We had to connect the somewhat invisible dots.

Our son always had fidgety fingers, so finding unbent paperclips didn't seem out of the ordinary. He also chewed on pens and pencils,

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so finding broken and empty pen tubes didn't raise eyebrows either. And, he was messy leaving fast-food bags on the floor of his car - just lazy, right?

Turns out the paperclips often had black resin on the tips, the pen tubes had stains, and the receipts from fast-food places revealed that he'd made a food purchase at 3 a.m. some 60 miles from our home on a Friday night when he was supposedly spending the night a friend's house the next street

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A high school student's car is a data mine for determining drug use. The odometer, ash tray, gas and food receipts, zip-top bags and rolls of aluminum foil all yield meaning. A winter glove is a hiding place for a lighter, the other has a one-hitter pipe and a bag of weed. A bottle of Motrin in an athletic bag seems benign but is a cache for drugs. Thanks to Google, You Tube and the Urban Dictionary, I learned all kinds of things about how these items had drug uses.

Hindsight

In high school, our son was like Leonardo DiCaprio in the movie *Catch Me If You Can*. He could skip class and not get caught or charm his way out of it. He'd park one place in the morning and within a couple of hours the car was somewhere else, and moved yet again before sports practice. His routine and patterns wove a story we didn't expect. And why not? Because at the time, his sports performance and standardized test scores were stellar. Drugs were his five-a-day routine, but the effects were not so apparent.

Several years later his peers would tell me he'd be taking hits in his car before practice. Why didn't they tell anyone? The code of honor among teens is strong, but if we'd known we might have addressed our concerns earlier and more aggressively. We might have coupled the evidence with his behavior to insist on deeper professional evaluation, to come a quicker conclusion. We might have had more influence, although we now know we still wouldn't have had any control over his predisposition for dependence.

Addiction experts once told us the fact we didn't immediately recognize our son's signs had very little to do with his craftiness or our inconclusive suspicions, but indicated how rapidly his chemical dependence had manifested. A casual partier or experimenter is often sloppy leaving unmistakable evidence, whereas a dependent user doesn't exhibit much because the drug-induced state is their normal behavior, and for a long time they can function quite well that way.

Just because you did it isn't a valid excuse

For this generation of parents, it's more and more common to be lenient about experimenting with drugs especially if your own use was just that: experimentation, a phase. In high school I did try pot a couple of times, and likely I'm among the minority, but I did not like it in the least. Maybe I could imagine my mother's words of warning. Whatever it was, within a matter of weeks I left it at that and never tried again.

Today's drugs, including marijuana, are stronger, more addictive and far more dangerous, so do not let your own prior use cloud your judgment in dealing with your teen's potential use. For about \$30 at any pharmacy, you can get a simple, at-home urine-analysis (UA) test that screens for all kinds of drugs, and for about \$20, you can get the marijuana-only test.

See the truth with honesty

Even if you don't suspect a problem, what's an inexpensive screen just to be sure? And just to get the dialog going? It sends an important message that drug use is not healthy or acceptable. I wish we'd done this even if it didn't change the facts or the outcomes.

We'll never know, and as I approach this journey spiritually, it's altogether possible that things are turning out as they are meant. That's not to say our words and actions would have made a difference; after all, parents are influencers.

In the long run, do more than talk with your teen about drugs and do more than search for evidence. Random drug testing is a loving, two-way barometer that puts suspicions to rest or brings the inconspicuous findings to light. UAs build honesty rather than diminish it, because whether your teen interprets a random drug test as caring concern or as invasion, it reminds them that you have eyes in the back of your head - eyes that see the possibilities. Every kid needs to know that, and every kid will understand it one day.

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