

“WHERE WERE THE PARENTS?”

A MESSAGE OF ENCOURAGEMENT TO THE FAMILIES OF THOSE AFFECTED BY SUBSTANCE ABUSE

It was just another Monday evening after a hard day at work. Dinner was over and it was time to take a look at today's newspaper and spend a little quiet time in “decompression mode.” There were all the usual national headlines and stories, a piece on road construction and when we might get some relief from it, re-caps of yesterday's sports events, the editorials, the comics and local news. It was the local news that caught my attention that evening.

Yet another 19-year-old had been brutally murdered in his car in one of the more dangerous local neighborhoods. Police who were investigating the scene reported that numerous traces of drugs and paraphernalia were found in the vehicle and speculated to the reporter that the murder had all the earmarks of a drug deal gone bad or possibly that the victim had defaulted on a drug debt. In looking into the victim's background, speaking with former classmates and neighbors, the reporter learned that the victim did indeed have a drug problem and it had been manifest since the age of fourteen.

I remember saying to myself, “What a tragedy.....19 years old, and life is over for this poor soul. What pain must the victim have suffered during the 5-year period of his addiction and what pain must have been felt by the family.” I also remember saying to myself, “Thank God it wasn't my son who died.”

After reading that jolting news and internalizing my reaction to it, I wrapped up my evening and went to bed and didn't think much more about the story until a couple of days later, when in the “letters to the editor” section, there appeared a letter from a subscriber that was titled “Where Were The Parents?” The body of the letter took on an indignant but sincere tone as it expressed outrage and anger that the parents of this pitiful victim could have “let it happen,” the “it” being drug addiction. Although the letter's primary question showed ignorance of the problem, it was a reasonable and understandable question to ask if the writer had never been confronted with the challenges of an addicted family member. As far as I know, no one ever responded to that rhetorical question. Here is the response I should have sent in to the paper:

“Where were the parents?” you ask. Let me tell you from personal experience where the parents were and how they “let it happen.”

They were both there in the delivery room that exciting day 19 years ago. Not only were the parents there, but also celebrating outside in the waiting room, were both sets of grandparents and a number of jubilant aunts, uncles and friends. The birth of that bouncing baby was heralded by the new parents as the high point of their lives as they rejoiced in the miracle that was that child.

Where were the parents? They were there when the baby needed food and shelter. They were there when the baby needed love, attention and care. They were prepared to sacrifice anything to assure that their child had the necessities of life and more.

They were there with camera in hand on the very first day of school. They were both sad and happy as they watched their little tyke ascend the steps of the school bus and wave from inside. They were also there at the end of that day to greet their rapidly growing child and share the excitement and wonder of this new stage of life. This same enthusiasm for supporting their child/student continued throughout elementary and middle school. They were there to help with homework, to give advice on “pressing” social issues, to condemn disrespectful, violent and profane music and videos. They were there to celebrate successes and to counsel and coach in areas where help was needed. They shared the “heartbreak” of the first failed romance and provided positive reinforcement for every productive accomplishment. They encouraged independent thought and the questioning of things “as they are” as opposed to how they “might be.” Further, they exposed their child to music lessons, basketball camp, and other extra-curricular activities to enable discovery of any hidden or obvious talent. And yes, they spoiled their child too...by buying the “right” brand of clothes, the latest video system, the “best” games, a cool stereo system, a portable CD player....the “necessities” of teenage life. Yes, the parents were there for all of that.

They were also there the day a little plastic bag with grains of marijuana in the bottom was discovered on the floor of their child’s room. There was an almost immediate denial of the obvious....this situation CAN’T be what it appears to be. Our child just wouldn’t do this. When the confrontation occurred, the child’s denial of any knowledge of how that bag got where it was found satisfied the parents because it confirmed their strong belief in their child. And then there was the next bag. And the bag after that. And then the pills. And then the alcohol. After each discovery, the truth became more ominous, the reality of the situation more undeniable and the resulting discipline more severe.

The parents were there that day in the high school guidance counselor’s office when the first discussion of poor attendance and declining grades occurred. They were there to double their efforts helping their child to turn things around, to make a commitment to improvement and to get assurance from their child that changes would be made. All of the normal discipline was intensified....withholding privileges, removal of video games from the house, denial of use of the stereo, no TV, and “grounding.”

The parents were also there at the school a few weeks later when it became clear that their efforts had been futile and that their child needed in-patient rehabilitation. The trip to the school that day to sign the withdrawal papers was as onerous and sad as attending a funeral, but it was necessary and critical to saving the child’s life. They expressed their contempt for the lifestyle their child had adopted but reinforced their love and hope as they traveled the 85 miles to the rehab facility...and traveled it again every weekend over the next four weeks for visits.

Those four weeks of “clean time” and counseling really seemed to make a difference. The child came home with a fresh outlook and a determination to “get better.” Faithful attendance in night classes at the local community college, a resulting high score on the GED test, and the awarding of a state-certified high school diploma all added to the sense of direction and accomplishment. Narcotics Anonymous meetings, a sponsor, a job and a purpose all seemed to be converging to bring closure to this horrible chapter in the parents’ and the child’s lives. Love, hope, encouragement, support and celebration were the order of the day as things started to return to “normal.”

The parents were also there when the relapses began. They were there to help their child attend weekly appointments with a psychologist. Although disappointed and yes, even discouraged, they were there with more support, love, and understanding, while never giving up or losing hope. In this stage of reinforcement of the principles that had been counseled in the rehabilitation center and by the psychologist, the clean time lasted nearly two years and it looked like the crisis might really be over this time.

They were also there that day, after two years of relative peace, when once again money was missing from their home along with the home theater, digital camera, and jewelry. They were also there that day to observe the needle tracks on their child’s arms from heroin usage after rescuing him from a “crack” house. It seemed like the end of life itself.

Where were the parents? They were there the entire time, doing what parents do. They went to work, went shopping, took an occasional vacation, even pursued some of their own interests, but through it all, they NEVER lost sight of their primary responsibility: raising their child to be a responsible citizen. They supervised their child’s development as attentively and competently as anyone could expect, and they did it ungrudgingly; in fact, enthusiastically. Nonetheless, the addiction occurred, the consequences were paid, and the struggle continued.

The next time you read about someone of any age who was involved in a drug-related episode, please don’t immediately assume that there were negligent parents responsible for the outcome. Our 22-year-old son, who recently graduated from the Teen Challenge one-year faith-based substance abuse recovery program, has given testimony in front of large crowds in churches all over the country, and to us directly, that it was NOT his parents’ fault...that the choices he made were his and his alone. Today, he is once again back on track, for which we are VERY thankful. But our vigilance in fulfilling our parental obligation is not over...it will be with us for as long as we live.

The typical parent of an addict looks and acts just like the typical parent of a child without this problem, with hopes, dreams and aspirations and a commitment to help their child achieve his or her full potential in life. The parents of addicts are our friends, our neighbors, members of our church, colleagues at work and regular folks with whom we interact every day. They are no different than any other parent...except for the challenge they courageously face every day and the tenacity with which they confront it.