

## From Police Calls to College Halls: A Mother's Story

Anonymous

When asked to recount our lives with David, I was very reluctant: How would he feel? How would I feel about dredging up only half-buried memories of misery and unhappiness? How could I discourage you, the reader, with a story that could have ended in divorce, jail, addiction, bitterness, and disappointment? Or should I give you what could be false hope by telling you that, in fact, David is an honor student in college now? We've moved away from the community where the neighbors justifiably hated us and feared our son -- with our marriage, family, and careers intact. How did it turn out so well? I really don't know. We are blessed, and I am still searching for what it is that we were saved to do.

Today, things are immeasurably better, but we are different. We no longer go to sleep each night worried that at any moment we'll be getting a phone call telling us that David is in jail, hurt, or dead! We no longer get calls from the police, or have them burst into our house. We no longer have to call the police ourselves because our belligerent son, drugged up on something he's "medicated" himself with, has threatened me or his sister, or is breaking up the furniture. All that is over now, but our lives have changed significantly.

In part due to the experiences she's had with her brother, his sister is not quite the sweet, warm, trusting, affectionate young woman that her childhood demeanor would have predicted. She's less vulnerable, a little more cautious, distant, and streetwise -- though the bitterness is subsiding. She understood his AD/HD and accommodated -- even enjoyed -- the high spirits and nonstop activity of the older brother who always wanted her companionship. It flattered her, but it also annoyed, even infuriated, her at times. During their childhood together, David pestered her, antagonized her, and made a mess that she too often had to clean up, literally, and figuratively.

As David got older, he became more marginalized -- the high jinx and risk-taking became less attractive and more intimidating to his friends and teachers. By junior high, the hyperactivity interfered with academic performance. His behavior worsened, the lies increased (or at least the consequences of them), and he began to experiment more frequently with self-medication. As his reputation deteriorated, he remained popular, but his group of friends changed.

Very bright, perceptive, and socially skilled, he had been able to do well in elementary school just by showing up and catching the snippets he needed. Of course, the teachers

complained about his messiness, interrupting, inability to stay in his seat, and other undesired behavior, but they always said he was "bored" and undisciplined (which, of course, they said was my fault). In junior high, with its multiple halls and many distractions, he frequently couldn't make it to class on time. At first, he was just frustrated. Then, as the detentions piled up, he became defiant, manipulative, and resentful.

One morning, a woman in my exercise class to whom I had opened up to in desperation, told me what she thought might be wrong with David and helped me through a nightmare of seventeen neurologists before I found one who referred me to a psychologist for testing. Finally, David was diagnosed with AD/HD.

It was a relief, but then the family denial, quarrels, fears, and blame began -- big time! Meanwhile, we fought the war over whether or not to give him medication as part of treatment. When we finally did, though he loved his new ability to concentrate, his therapeutic dosage was very high and brought with it shakes, loss of appetite, sleep, and weight, and "feeling weird." Moreover, although we didn't know it yet, by then he had found marijuana, which did not have the side effects of his medicine and made him believe his symptoms were relieved. In fact, retrospectively, we saw that it did calm him; and unwittingly, we encouraged him, because when he got "out of control," I would demand that he "run around the block," which seemed to use up the excess energy. Many years later, I learned that he would actually go somewhere out of sight and smoke a joint, to return feeling more relaxed and able to cope with the pressures of family life, homework, etc.

Meanwhile, the evidence of minor thievery was evident, but my husband was in heavy denial. *His* son couldn't possibly be stealing cigarettes and money. But he was and I knew it. (It got a lot worse before it got better.) The gulf between my husband and me grew, and my son and then later my daughter, played on this schism in order to manipulate us, and probably, to get the help they needed but we didn't know how to give.

We sent David to therapy, but he was so non-compliant that the therapists asked us to come in for family work. David would not go with us, but the therapist had at least succeeded in getting us into couples therapy -- the ONLY thing (beside love -- very buried) that saved our marriage (other than the desperate realization that neither of us were capable of coping alone and that no one else would have us with this mess on our hands!)

Improvement was still years away. The high school years involved "hoods in the woods," otherwise known as Outward Bound for Troubled Youth, which is the only thing besides our love that, looking back, David said had ever really done him any good. Then there was our "discovery" of his drug use, and his institutionalization in rehab (for as long as the insurance held out, of course). Afterward, we sued the school for an "

appropriate alternative" and had him sent to "boarding school," which was just another word for reform school. Though it saved our lives, it didn't do much for David. They threw him out near the end -- back to public school. Unfortunately, he only lasted a few weeks before he quit school "to get a job:" a job he never did get, unless you count selling pot, which he apparently became rather good at, along with other nefarious activities.

**T**he police incidents and short-term incarcerations increased. But the courts would always release him. It cost us a great deal of money in bail, which somehow always got forfeited, despite promises that he would appear. Yet, the court was firm on its position that a middle class child was going to stay in his parents' home until age nineteen, and the courts had no interest in helping us. (I knew from a societal point of view they were right, but it was hard to take.) If we were to keep him out by court order, any contact, even phone calls, made my husband and me subject to arrest. In fact, at one point, when the local police did not realize that an order of protection obtained at County had been lifted, the town police raided our house and tried to take my husband and me away in handcuffs for "harboring David." Only my husband's rage and threatened lawsuit saved us that time.

**T**he next year, David tried to return to the public high school for his senior year. By then, they wouldn't take him, but arranged for a "special" day school. Once again, the academics were not the least bit challenging, so he slept through class and just barely managed to stay in until late May -- when they had finally had enough and threw him out about three weeks before graduation. Realizing, however, that in our state the public schools are obligated to pay for education until age twenty-one, the district reconsidered and allowed him to graduate with his class. He had learned nothing in high school, but at least they were rid of him!

**M**eanwhile, the multi-drug use had progressed, and the police had had it. They organized a raid, called us right before it was to occur, and tore our home apart. Under surveillance for a long while, David had been suspected of selling drugs. Amazingly, David had only trace amounts of marijuana on him at the time of the arrest -- enough to charge him only with minor possession. But, finally, he was scared! Whether it was maturity, fear that since he was graduating and nineteen we would be able to throw him out, or a good hard look in the mirror, he straightened out. Actually, he spent the summer in his room, proving that he was ready to give up the drugs and delinquent behavior and go to college.

**F**rankly, we were glad to have a way to get him out of the house, and we all knew this was it. Either he succeeded in college or he was "history." Remarkably, we found a state school with reasonable tuition and without entrance requirements in a nice, quiet community down south that would accept him. The experiment worked. Later, he told us that at first it was all "just a con" to get away from home and away from the setting where he realized he was on "borrowed time." He quickly found, however, that, though

they were all remedial classes, he was enjoying them. (Since he hadn't really gone to high school, it was all new for him.) Moreover, he was succeeding. In fact, once he decided to put himself into it, he began to get all A's and B's -- though he still has not been able to complete the remedial math course (his deficit). Last semester, he even made the President's list!

Even at his worst, David has always loved and been wonderful with small children. He is now in English Education, with a desire to teach in elementary school, and eventually, in college. His relationships are appropriate. The girls he chooses are wonderful, and we like his friends. However, he still can't drive -- bad accidents and assigned risk reflect his attentional difficulties -- and money is always a problem, though he is improving. At twenty-two, he still has the maturity of a teenager in many ways. But, that's what you would expect of one who "ditched" his teen years.

David knows it will never be easy. He occasionally takes medication to study and take tests. He still doesn't like it, though the side effects have been greatly reduced (we both guess that may be because his is no longer "self-medicating" at the same time). He recognizes that he has certain limitations, but he sees them as assets, as well. He knows that he has had to become more perceptive than most people, just to read the minimal cues, and his conning and lying have mostly been put to rest. These "talents" have been coupled with his natural creativity and transformed into skills. He writes and speaks well and enjoys it, and he is also learning the value of learning, of not depending on his own wiles so much, and adventuring into literature and the experience of others. In other words, he's a successful college student.

The question for him is, "how will this translate to 'real life?'" With all of the remedial classes he had to take before he entered his curriculum, he'll probably be twenty-four before he graduates. He's anxious to get on with it, but we feel he needs the time, and he's using it well.

What does all this mean for those who are going through it now, or anticipate that they may have to face something like this? All I can offer by way of advice is that which was told to me for years: "live in the moment." It sounds like a cliché, but once I finally figured out what meant, both David and I began to get things straight. I used to worry: If I didn't do this, or he didn't do that, what would it be like for him when he was an adult? What I needed to worry about was how it was for us right then. When he was good, I should have taken it more at face value, not let myself feel that he was "making up for X," or that "he's being nice now, but..." Those were wasted emotions. I felt so used and betrayed that I seldom reinforced the good moments. I gave David no reason to strive to be better.

My husband went from denial to depression; he couldn't deal with the "here and now." Finally, we got it: all you have is what is right in your face -- deal with it! And we did. It's not easy, but try, try, and keep trying -- the sooner the better.

***The author is a long time member of CHADD; CHADD helped make a difference for her child and her family.***

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