

"Tough Teens"

I spent the summer months of 1998 working at a live-in drug and alcohol treatment center for adolescents. A place named Thunder Road. I knew that I had something to offer and much to learn. The latter proved enormous.

Their age ranges were from 13-18 years old, and 42 of the 50 clients were male. The courts had given them the treatment option instead of juvenile hall. Their range of stay at Thunder Road was anywhere from 45 days to 1 year, depending on their case. The only thing keeping them from the outside world were the alarms on the doors. Escaping would be no problem. But they all knew that going AWOL would not only lead them back to juvenile hall, but would damage their chance for healthier lives.

These boys and girls are very familiar with addiction and abuse. They had grown up surrounded by it. They are at Thunder Road simply because they have learned that abuse is acceptable. Addiction is a normal part of life. They do not know how to stop their own self-destruction. I walked into my first shift with hopes of inspiring and changing the lives of these teenagers. A tough, skeptical bunch. Penetrating stares. Some immediately opened themselves up to me. Others avoided all eye contact. The air reeked of pain and anger. I was terrified.

I had made a pledge to myself that I would not get caught up in trying to be a tough guy. A gangster wannabe. I would simply work very hard at being honest and comfortable with myself and, thus, them. These were some very angry and destructive young people. I soon found that the fire that fueled my sense of self-worth started to be

extinguished by the walls that divided us. I would walk through the door feeling like Zeus, and exit underneath the cracks beneath the door. I was beginning to share their pain and feel my own.

What causes addiction?

Why do children have to experience abuse?

These are questions that stayed on my mind even on my days off. There were many moments that I wanted to walk out the door and never turn back. Then, I would have an unexpected meaningful moment with one of the teenagers. Once, it was a boy that I will call J. He was known as the toughest. A well-built gang-member from San Jose. He was one of the many who avoided me like a virus. One night he approached me and asked me to have a "one on one." (These conversations were part of their weekly regiment) I was surprised and a bit intimidated.

At first, he was hidden behind the cleverly built interior fortress. He talked tough. Then we began to speak.

He looked at me with a bit of skepticism as I explained how I look at life as a choice between two paths: self-destruction or enlightenment. I asked him if he was afraid. Suddenly, his complexion changed. His eyes opened. He told me about the pressures that he felt to be tough.

"I am scared to reveal my feelings and sensitivity because I do not want to be perceived as weak."

The more we spoke the more I witnessed the menacing stare transform into the look

of a frightened little boy. The fear had been cleverly covered with anger and addiction. I told him that I could see that he was a leader, but, that the most powerful leaders communicate with their hearts and not their fists. We hugged and he walked away. I felt deeply affected by this conversation. Did he?

Once a week there is a mandatory meeting called confrontation group. The person(s) that is chosen to be confronted is usually the one that claims that everything is okay.

Denial, the great ally of addiction.

He/she stands up and faces the circle of peers and staff. Everyone participates in shouting out their concerns for the individual. Sometimes harsh and painfully honest perceptions have to be heard by the chosen one. The angriest and toughest always end up in tears. One day I watched as yet another claimed that everything was great with his family. He fought back the tears and pain that had been carefully buried. He finally broke.

"We don't talk about feelings in my family."

His stories of an abusive, emotionally unavailable father were all too familiar. I felt sick to my stomach. My own angry teenage years stemmed from the same negligence. Now, I was surrounded by a roomful of similar wounds. I realized that the anger caused from fear and pain turns to self-sabotage, and deals a blow of destruction to the possibilities of healthy relationships. **The only relationship that seemed to work was the addiction.**

As the two months came to an end, I had one last memorable encounter. I was asked to guide a boys mirror time. He stands in front of the mirror and looks into his own eyes for 15 minutes. I watch to make sure that he doesn't get distracted. I also guide him to say certain things out loud as he stares into his soul. It was intense to watch him look at himself as he said things like, *"I am strong"* and *"I will take care of myself"*

As he finished I joined him in front of the mirror. We both said "I love you" a number of times to our own eyes. A powerful experience for us both.

I may never know the impact that I had upon the lives of this group of youths. I passed along some stories of my own teenage years, and spoke a lot about my experiences traveling to India. I tried to help them see that the world is much bigger than the trap of addiction. I did learn more and more about the impact that they had upon my life. I realized my own addictions. I looked back upon my painful past with new eyes. I realized that the greatest medicine for self-hatred is a sense of purpose. It is criminal to think of the children that experience emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. I heard SO many unbelievable stories. The chapters of life that should never be written.

Many of these teens will end up returning to the same path that brought them to Thunder Road. I saw over a dozen kids AWOL in my two months stay. Now they are running from the law and their own chance to heal. The effect of Thunder Road is difficult to measure. After an individual is discharged, they come back every month for counseling sessions. They are encouraged to build goals and stay sober.

THEIR FAMILY GETS INVOLVED WITH
THEIR LIFE.

I can only hope that some of my sharing
helped them with their struggles. I walked
away from Thunder Road still believing that
honesty and love can heal ANYONE.

Even "tough" teens....