

on the MOVE

Fighting through addiction:



'It's a miracle every day I'm clean'

Maggie Leasure, 18, outside of her family's home in Pittsford.

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Graduation is when important achievements are celebrated, and that's been doubly true for Maggie Leasure. The 18-year-old's path to her commencement involved challenges that went far beyond her schoolwork.

Only two days before her graduation from Our Lady of Mercy High School, Maggie arrived home from Utah, where she had spent nearly the entire 2000-01 school year undergoing treatment for drug and alcohol addiction.

On June 20, graduation day, those gathered at the Eastman Theater had been asked to hold their applause until all Mercy graduates had received their diplomas. Nevertheless, several loud cheers sprang forth when Maggie walked across the stage.

"I was crying my eyes out," she recalled.

Maggie's graduation was a positive step in her fight to overcome a long history of substance use and abuse. She traces it back to sixth grade, when she began sipping alcohol. She was drinking steadily by eighth grade, and at age 15 she was smoking marijuana in large quantities — sometimes getting high as often as 10 times a day.

"I had to get high when I got out of bed, to go to sleep at night," she recalled.

Alcohol and pot were soon followed by LSD and opium. Her lifestyle began to revolve around attending rock concerts and hanging out with other teens and young adults who used drugs.

Maggie, who grew up in the affluent Rochester suburb of Pittsford, remarked that substance abuse exists at all socioeconomic levels but "it's easier for well-to-do people to get away with it." She also said she immersed herself into the drug culture because "I didn't want people to think of me as this Pittsford snob."

A big shy streak also factored in prominently, she remarked. "I never felt I was good enough. Taking that drink or that drug, I felt it was letting me be the person I wanted to be."

Her high-school years, she said, were marked by several attempts to get clean, but she always returned to taking drugs. "I couldn't wait until I could do it again," she said.

When she couldn't hide her addiction any longer, her family protested — and Maggie bolted. "I got to a point of 'This is what I'm going to do. If you don't like it, I'm leaving home.'"

Approximately one year ago, Maggie hit bottom. She moved into the city of Rochester with a former boyfriend. As her senior year at Our Lady of Mercy began, Maggie attended only a handful of classes.

"I hadn't taken a shower in weeks, hadn't brushed my hair in a year," she said. She added that she became so dysfunctional, "I would walk around the city and not have a place to sleep. I'd be wet and cold and sleeping on the ground."

"I don't really know where it switched, but there was no 'me' left."

Finally, through the intervention of family members, Maggie went out-of-state last fall to begin several months of rehabilitation. Though she initially balked at the process,

Maggie came to accept her counselors' efforts and began taking the necessary steps toward recovery. She also kept up with her schoolwork and earned her diploma from Mercy — a milestone that had appeared unattainable just months earlier.

"I was just thinking, 'How did I get here?'" Maggie said of her graduation day. "I was just so thankful there was a God that brought me here."

This fall Maggie will attend Sterling College, a small agricultural school in Vermont. She would eventually like to join the Peace Corps, working with poor farmers in Third World countries.

She also foresees a future in some counseling role, helping other teens affected by substance abuse. Even now, she is opting to go public about her struggles rather than make up some story about her time in Utah. "It is a lot easier to say I was in boarding school," she remarked.

She knows that not everyone may heed her warnings. "Most people who need to hear it, don't want to," she acknowledged. "But to me, it's worth it to have nine dirty looks and one person who wants to go for help. I wish I could tell kids 'Don't touch it.' I know this is not realistic, but my prayer for the world is that nobody does drugs anymore."

She apparently has plenty of support for her courageous stance. On Aug. 4, Maggie announced during a workshop on drug and alcohol addiction at the Diocesan Youth Convention that she's been clean for nearly a year. Immediately, the 50 teens who filled the room burst into applause.

Despite her concerns for others, Maggie realizes that her current top priority is her own well-being. "I try not to think about everything so much, what people are going to think. I can't worry about clothes, money, boyfriend. I need to just be OK with myself, period," she stated.

Fortunately, she said, she has a strong support network of family and friends who have never let her down. She also maintains a strong faith in God, saying she doesn't believe she'd have gotten this far without it.

"It feels like I didn't do it alone. It's a miracle every day I'm clean," she said.

Maggie pointed out that staying clean is a daunting challenge, and the threat of a relapse still looms. "It's something I'll always have to live with," she said.

But she also knows that if she starts abusing again, "I'll be right back where I was. If I go back, I will die. If it's not my body, I will die spiritually, emotionally."

Part of what keeps her sober, Maggie said, is her concern about the damage her abuse has already caused: "It's affected my family, my mind — God only knows what it's done to my body."

Despite these tough realities, Maggie remains optimistic about her future.

"Right now I'm more hopeful that I am happy," she said. "It's still really hard, but I have faith that I'll have complete serenity in my life again someday."

"I was just so thankful there was a God that brought me here."



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