

ON THE MOUNTAIN

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From tough times to triumph

At only 17 years old, Erica Hoffman has already gained field experience toward her planned career as a chemical dependency counselor.

That experience came right under her own roof.

Erica found out six years ago that her mother is an alcoholic. Her father left home when she was born and her parents had no other children together, so Erica has often been the chief means of support for her mom.

At times, her home life caused Erica to miss school. She also found herself growing up in a hurry, almost by necessity.

"I've always seemed to have a personality to take charge. I feel like I'm really responsible for a lot of things," she said.

Erica joined a chapter of Alateen, a fellowship of young people whose lives have been affected by someone else's drinking. Alateen members share their experiences and offer mutual support.

"I was there because I needed to relate to others," Erica said.

Meanwhile, her mother — whom Erica declined to identify by name — became involved in Alcoholics Anonymous, a support system for adults who are trying to give up drinking.

Erica attended public schools before entering Nazareth Academy in the fall of 1998. She has worked extensively with Jacque Ruth, who coordinates special education at Nazareth. Ruth said that Erica, in addition to her unstable home life, has struggled with a learning disability in reading and writing.

Even so, Erica has progressed steadily during her time at Nazareth. She has reached the honor roll during every quarter of the current school year, and has required less and less help from Ruth in the process. "She's weaned herself from me. I'm thrilled," Ruth said. "There have been moments when she was dragged down, but she's always bounced back."

As she has gained success in the classroom, Erica has also become more open about her home life. "When I first came (to Nazareth) I didn't talk to anyone about it," she said. "Then I just kind of said to myself 'It's not that big a deal' and now I feel comfortable."

A big reason for disclosing this information, Erica said, is to clue her peers in on the many negative effects of addiction. "I want to help people who don't understand. If people are clueless about it now, where are they going to end up?" she remarked.

Erica shared details of her childhood on an application for the Greece Youth Hall of Fame. "She was very open and forthcoming, more than many people I know," said Anne Graham, Nazareth Academy's director of guidance, who prepared the application with Erica's input.

Erica was subsequently accepted into the Hall of Fame, and was inducted during a ceremony that took place May 6. And that's not all: On May 29, Erica received further honors at her high school's annual awards program. She was given the NAPA (Nazareth Academy Parents Association) Award, presented annually to a graduating senior who displays leadership qualities as well as religious and social growth. Also on awards night, Erica earned a departmental honor in business and technology, and was reissued her Greece Youth Hall of Fame award.

Erica attends St. John's Lutheran Church in Irondequoit. She still lives in Greece with her mother, who continues to get professional counseling and is waging an overall successful battle with her



Nazareth Academy senior Erica Hoffman (right) poses with Jacque Ruth, the school's director of special education, after an awards assembly May 29. Erica won two awards during the ceremony in addition to the Greece Youth Hall of Fame award, which she received May 6.

alcoholism. Erica is also pleased that she reconnected with her father a couple of years ago and has a good relationship with him.

In the fall she plans to begin studies at Monroe Community College to help those with substance abuse. "I know a lot about the field. I guess I think I could help people with coping with this," she said.

Erica acknowledged that over the summer — and in the years that lie ahead — she'll encounter situations that test her own resolve regarding substance abuse. Although she has consumed alcohol on a limited basis, Erica said she always refrains from going further due to the hereditary nature of alcoholism: The disease also extends to her grandparents.

"I know I'm at a real risk for being an alcoholic," she said.

“Drinking and driving is the worst thing that could happen because you could kill somebody, or yourself.”

Taking a stand on alcohol means she'll have to withstand her friends' peer pressure at such events as graduation parties this summer. "I know they're going to try to get me to go along with them," she said. "I'd be like, if that's your attitude there's nothing I can do about it."

On the other hand, she doesn't feel comfortable lecturing her peers: "I can't tell them what to do and not do. I could say what I feel — 'Don't drink, don't drive' — but sometimes that doesn't get through."

Yet if someone were to grab his or her car keys while under the influence, that's where Erica said she would take decisive action.

"Drinking and driving is the worst thing that could happen because you could kill somebody, or yourself," she stated.