

December 1, 2009

Dear Friend:

We were a “regular family” or so we thought. We would like to tell this story to be one of hope for any family going through the difficulties of raising a child with substance abuse issues. As a parent, we are given a job that there is no manual for, and it is the most difficult of jobs under ideal conditions, and compounded tenfold when you notice these problems. What we have learned in the years of handling this problem could fill a journal, but more importantly, we learned we were not alone. There was hope and people to work with who understood what we were going through.

Our story starts when “Anthony” was about 14 years old, the youngest of four children. From an early age, “Anthony” struggled with school academically, but very few problems with discipline. He made friends easily and generally held on to them for a time.

We moved in June 1996, when “Anthony” was around 8 years old. He started attending a new school which he seemed excited about and made friends easily. During late 2002 into early 2003, we started to notice changes in behavior, and a major carefree attitude about school. Achievement was not important and there was a great deal of new friends coming around. We attributed this to teenage behavior and it seemed normal to what our other children had done. The difference was that there were many things done in secrecy and not always healthy. “Anthony” also had no desire to work at this time and would always be needing money.

Summer school was necessary to move on to the next grade, and he was not happy at all. Early on in the next school year, things started to go down hill. “Anthony” did next to nothing in class and his behavior was inconsistent. We arranged for him to see his primary doctor and the doctor explained to us that he sensed “Anthony” was going through some depression issues, and possibly self-medicating with drug use, particularly marijuana. He recommended that “Anthony” see a psychiatrist, and we pursued this treatment. It took weeks to get the appointment and we were thinking once he sees this doctor things were going to get better. We were wrong.

We tried several alternative ideas looking for help. Outpatient seemed to be going well, but once again old habits started to occur. The next recommendation was *Touchstone Hall*, a program of Vantage Health System.

The initial contacts were made and arrangements were made for him to move directly from the 30 day program to an extended 90 day plus program at *Touchstone Hall*. We sat down on March 17, 2005, and signed him on for his stay. **To say it was a day that changed our lives and “Anthony’s” life is an understatement.**

At first, “Anthony” became irritated and angry after learning the house rules of *Touchstone*. He attempted to leave, but with the help of the staff and our previous history, we were capable of telling him, “you are not welcome in our house until you complete this program and show us you are capable of staying clean.” The most difficult words we ever had to say, but in hindsight, the best we could do.

The program at *Touchstone* was incredible. The first few weeks were an evaluation and cleanup time. There would be no visitation from anyone, but we were kept up-to-date from his primary counselor of his status. The program insists that as parents we must attend Saturday meetings to be considered for seeing our son. The meetings were incredibly helpful and reinforced the fact that we needed help as well as our child.

We looked forward to every Saturday. Soon after his initial dislike, he looked forward to seeing us, which prior to that he would do anything to not have to see us. **We almost immediately saw a change that would bring back that kid we remembered.** The counselors explained that one Saturday we would walk in and see a 'PPC,' which is a profound personality change. We did. It was like someone turned a switch on. He was a completely different person. He was respectful, considerate, talkative, and polite, which we had not seen in a long time. The counselors would go on to explain that it would take 30 plus days for the body to cleanse itself, and they would then begin to learn the tools necessary for getting on with a positive life.

The summer progressed and "Anthony" did something foolish in the "house" and got himself into trouble, which was going to extend his stay. This conflicted with our family vacation, but the counselors and staff suggested we go and they would handle the situation. Again, we listened and they were again right. Later in the week, we would receive an apology for his behavior and good wishes for our vacation. It was difficult.

After some time, "Anthony" regained privileges lost due to his error. He was eventually given a discharge date, but first had to tell his story to the entire group, as well as parents, including ourselves. This we knew was going to be tough. He prepared and addressed the group and explained his life from early to present and went on to describe many details we had never known.

"Anthony" graduated *Touchstone Hall* after 7 ½ months and left the program a much better person. We were still nervous, but we knew it was up to him to succeed. He moved into an intensive 3 day per week outpatient program, that was part of the discharge agreement. He graduated that program and shortly thereafter graduated high school on time.

To summarize our experience, "Anthony" learned how to be comfortable in his own skin, and we learned how to deal with things that were out of our control. I believe all the programs contributed and helped "Anthony," but the *Touchstone Hall* program worked the best. I also believe in NEVER GIVING UP. The child you had is still in there, but being masked and dragged down by forces that neither you nor they can control on their own. Seek help. Let the professionals do their job.

Good luck to all,
"Anthony's" Parents

"Anthony's" story is just one of Vantage Health System's many success stories. In order for us to continue to serve the community, we need your help! This year, we are also feeling the strain of the economy. Enclosed please find our giving envelope – please donate what you can. Together, we can change lives and save the lives of men, women, and children in Bergen County and beyond. Thank you for your support!