

"Why do you think teenagers become involved with drugs and alcohol?"

As I prepare to go off to college, I have begun to look back at my childhood; trying to see how I got where I am today, who has helped me here, and how I wish to continue my life so I can look back on it just as fondly as I do my childhood. I have realized that I have only gotten to where I am today—ranked 7th in my class and having a wide circle of friends and family who love me—because of the choices I have made. I have lived for those who love me, and have lived healthily so as to honor the commitment I have made to the people I love. When preparing these essays for the Laura Mersereau scholarship, and for my personal reflection, I stumbled upon a quote by M. Scott Peck, "It is only because of problems that we grow mentally and spiritually."

Growing up is about experiencing as much as possible, learning as much as possible, drawing in the advice and experiences from those who have already grown up, and forming your own opinions about the world, yourself and life. Unfortunately, experiencing the world, for some, means experiencing the *whole* world for themselves, rather than relying on the stories from others for the experiences that can be more harmful. I have seen more than a few good lives ruined by substance abuse—relatives, friends and the families of friends—for me to be even remotely interested in pursuing that part of life. But I know of hundreds of kids who have developed a keen interest in this side of life.

Contrary to what some authority figures in our society have been led to believe, the use of drugs and alcohol amongst teenagers is not confined to one gender, race, neighborhood or social class. Substance abuse, I guarantee, can be found in every high school everywhere in the world, and it will never be completely eradicated. Teenagers become involved with drugs and alcohol out of boredom and curiosity, but I don't think that "The Teenagers" can stand alone in taking the blame for substance abuse. Our culture has romanticized *everything* including sex and violence, and how drugs and alcohol can bring pleasure to these activities so; naturally, teenagers would be interested in experiencing drugs and alcohol. We have been shown by our media—for which we can lay the blame for most of society's shortcomings, but I digress—that drugs and alcohol can get you the girl or guy, can make you more sexy, and can turn a boring night into a good time. Honestly, who wouldn't want to participate in something that can bring you all of that?

In order to counteract these harmful notions that The Media has given teenagers, middle-schoolers across the country have it beaten in them that drugs and alcohol are, in fact, bad for you. They are shown the brain damage that perpetual partying can give you, and how the smoking of any substance will inevitably give you smoker's lung. As a middle-schooler I, alongside my classmates, thought that it was ridiculous that our teachers thought that we would get into underage drinking, and swore that we would never try the "party drugs". My group of friends, after seeing what happened to my best friend's brother, were among the few who actually stayed away from substances.

Jeff—whose name is not, in fact, Jeff, but has been changed to protect his privacy—moved to Oregon with my best friend when he was a freshman in high school. He was smart, sociable, and had the top time as a freshman Cross Country runner. But, like all of these stories go, he became friends with the wrong people and got accustomed to spending his Friday nights drinking and smoking pot. He did this for four years so, naturally, he didn't do well in high school. One day his senior year, he got high before

school and came to school on a rampage. He ran around the school, barging into classrooms and screaming at his fellow classmates about the atrocities of being alive and living under the influence of substances. Despite his avid efforts not to be caught, he was escorted off of campus by three policemen and was admitted into the hospital. His parents found out that night that he had been dealing and doing drugs for four years. They never knew.

What he did affected his life and family more than he had ever dreamed possible his freshmen year when he first got himself into the mess; his parents got divorced, his sister went through a period of mild depression and he was placed into a rehabilitation center for a year. Fortunately for him, his story ended well. He is a counselor for Narcotics Anonymous for recovering drug-users, is attending Portland State University full-time, his mother and father are both extremely happy—his mom realized that she was never happy in the marriage and is now living with happily with her daughter—and his sister is graduating high school in the top 10% of her class. He has touched alcohol only once—and drugs never again—since the incident his senior year, and what he learned that one time reaffirmed my belief that I want to live a substance-free life.

He got drunk one night out of curiosity; to see if he had as much fun drunk as he remembered having when he was in high school. When he told me and my friend about it the next day, he was angry; angry at himself for ever having thought that he had more fun while intoxicated, because all he did while drunk that last time was sit at home, in the dark and play his guitar. He realized that he wants to live a sober life so he can get accomplished all that he wants to get accomplished, and to live every day that he has to its fullest. And I respect him for that.

"What is the most challenging factor influencing this decision?"

The only reason that the people I know have gotten into drugs and alcohol is curiosity. And boredom. Kids in Wilsonville, like teenagers everywhere in the United States, wake up, go to school, go home, do homework, go to bed, and wake up the next day to start the cycle again. They resort to drugs and alcohol on the weekend because it's illegal, it's dangerous, and it gives them the opportunity to make a boring night more exciting. And while they may believe that become intoxicated so they can no longer stand up is the only way to have a good time, I have to disagree. I have gone through high school without ever having done drugs, or drinking alcohol and my life is less monotonous because of it.

"They"—they being the ones who actively participate in Wilsonville's party scene—insist that drinking is the only way they can escape the monotony of the school week, the only way that they can break the chain of repeated actions week after boring week, but in using these substances, they contradict themselves; they do it *every week*. It sounds like substances have become a part of their life: that they rely on them for a good time when they are with their friends. By actively staying away from these parties and the substances that come along with them, my circle of friends has experienced Wilsonville and the Portland area more in-depth than some of our classmates might believe possible. We call Friday nights "Spontaneous Nights"; every Friday we gather a group together in a random meeting place in Wilsonville, at parks, parking lots, people's houses, or street corners, and plan our night. We rarely do the same thing twice.

Last year we started taking Salsa Dancing lessons. There is a dancing studio in downtown Portland called "Satin Latin" that offers weekly \$5 lessons open to anyone who can pay the entrance fee. For an hour, instructors teach different levels of Salsa dancers, depending on where each person left off the week before, and at the end of the night, they have an hour of an open dance floor. We were willing to break our rule for Spontaneous Nights—by doing the same thing for eight weeks in a row—because we had never had so much fun for \$5. At the end of two months, we were all at the "Dark Green" level (each level has a different color associated with it, and they use the color cards to keep track of the progress students are making) before we had to stop going because school became more difficult in the Spring. We used two months of Friday nights to learn how to dance according to another culture, thus broadening our perspectives on the world, while our classmates drank and smoke those two months away.

On another Spontaneous Night that was completely unique, we decided to try to formulate a "rainbow dinner"; each person that was invited was assigned a category of dish—be it appetizer, main entrée, or dessert—and then a color to go with that dish. I was given the daunting task of "purple appetizer", but was more than eager to accept the cooking challenge. I ended up spending several hours making Eggplant Dip: a dish that turned out not to be purple, but green. We learned that night that Eggplant does not make a good dip and that rice needs to be cooked for more than 10 minutes. We came to school on Monday filled with stories from our Rainbow Dinner, only to find out that one of our classmates had been killed in a drinking and driving accident. A senior was the passenger in a car with his drunken girlfriend who flipped the car into a ditch. Everyone at school was devastated, and we were never more grateful that we developed Spontaneous Nights; we would never kill someone we loved because we had become intoxicated.

I believe that the most challenging factor when it comes to drinking or doing

drugs is boredom. Substance abuse provides an easy out for those who are not creative enough to come up with alternatives to drinking, but if those who often drink and do drugs were willing to take 15 minutes to be creative, then their lives would be more healthy, their bodies less weak, and their minds more powerful from the creative exercise. Alongside my friends, I have made it through high school without once abusing a substance, and we did it because we value the limited time we have as teenagers. We only have had four years to use our youth as an excuse for our outings and antics, and we didn't want to waste our time sitting around a table, drinking until we threw up. I have had such a wide spectrum of experiences in high school that I find it hard to believe that some of my classmates have never ventured beyond substances. Maybe they are too lazy to think, or maybe they are more willing to take the easy way out. I, however, now know how to cook eggplant dip, and am proud to be a "Dark Green" salsa dancer.

"How have you stayed away from drugs and alcohol?"

On the first day of AP Psychology class my sophomore year, our teacher asked us the intellectually stimulating question, "If you had to choose one sense to lose, which one would you select?" Some kids said "Smell!", others said, "Eyesight, DUH!" While some shouted "Taste!", trying to be heard above the noise. I, however, sat in my seat, completely indecisive. I was not at that time able to imagine living my life without one of my senses, and I don't believe that I ever will be able to, which is one of the reasons I have stayed away from drugs and alcohol; I have always wanted to live my life, experience it wholly, and *remember* it.

After almost every weekend these past four years, I have heard horror stories about Friday and Saturday night. Stories from, and about, kids who have gone to parties, gotten caught with substances, and landed themselves in socially mutilating situations. I have a friend—an exclusively "school friend"—who always seems to come out for the worse over the weekend. She has landed herself in dozens of bad situations while under the influence. One event that sticks out the most prominently was over the summer: she was out with a guy that she liked, and they both got completely wasted; she decided that he was better fit to get them home, so she let him drive her car. Ironically enough, he drove the car into a tree on the side of the freeway. They were both fine, but her parents grounded her for the rest of the summer, and she promised herself that she wouldn't become involved with those substances again. But she continues to go back to them.

Just a month ago, after telling me that she resolved to never become involved with drugs and alcohol, she went to a Halloween party with her usual crowd of friends. That night, she finally kissed the guy that she had been liking, and had an amazing time. But she doesn't remember any of it. The only bit of her night that she is still able to recall was throwing up on the host's couch, for which, she was ridiculed and stared down at school. I cannot imagine enduring that kind of blatant hate; she did not necessarily have control of her actions, and she cannot remember the "amazing night" that she was told she had. All she remembers is throwing up, and being hated by the kids at school.

In an attempt to alleviate the sadness she was feeling at school that next week, I invited her out to see "Religulous" with me: a movie we both desperately had been wanting to see. On the way to the movie theater, she told me about the random drug tests her parents give her at home, the early curfew they have her set on, and how they monitor her cell phone usage. To her, this strict supervision wasn't too bad because she was still able to go to parties on the weekend. She lives in a constant state of mistrust with her parents, but is still willing to sneak around them to go to parties and hang out with people they have forbidden her to be with. But despite the way in which she deceives herself and her family, I still have some empathy for her.

It takes a great amount of strength to break away from your friends, especially when you have been friends with them for the majority of your life, and because of the hold that these friends have on her, I don't necessarily blame her for all of her actions. In an attempt to help my friend lead a more healthy life, I have offered her a flotation device; a chance for her to hold onto something more solid, and take a breath of fresh air. She has also vowed to herself—and mentioned to me—that she intends to make a fresh start in college; she plans on surrounding herself with people like me, who know what they want out of their lives, and are not willing to sacrifice their happiness for moments of seductively intoxicating pleasure. And that's all that I can do for her. She is my friend,

and it is my job to provide her with an out and trust that she will know how to make friends with those who are of a like mind with her. When the time comes.

I have stayed away from drugs and alcohol, because I have seen firsthand what they can do to the relationships in a person's life. The taboo of substances can lead a person to willfully deceive the people that care about them, and I have never been willing to sacrifice my relationships or my future. I care too much about the ones I care about and have placed too much hope and time into my future to allow anything to stop me from living what I believe to be a successful life. I just want to live.