

Addiction therapist Larry Fritzlan insists that parents draw the line and set consequences for their out-of-control teens

BY KATY BUTLER

To parents who worry about Marin County's high rates of teenage alcohol and drug use, 2005 had its share of warning signs. Almost exactly a year ago (January 14, 2005), Daniel Ashkenazy, a bright, popular Redwood High graduate who grew up in Tiburon, died at age 20 after a night of partying at a UC San Diego fraternity. He'd been using Oxycontin, sometimes called "heroin in pill form," and after his death his mother warned that its use was "epidemic" among young people. In February, David Sheff of Inverness, writing in the *New York Times Magazine*, described how his son Nick's high school and early college years had been so warped by methamphetamine addiction that he'd robbed his younger brother's piggy bank. And early this past November, 18-year-old Scott Van Hootegem of Novato left a no-adults party in Ignacio and slammed his truck into a tree on Indian Valley Road, killing himself and a close friend riding with him. His blood alcohol level was three times the legal limit.

These events confirm three tacitly accepted realities: first, kids here experiment widely with drugs and alcohol; second, a substantial minority ends up using fair amounts of them (48 percent of local 11th-



Despite his genial manner, Larry Fritzlan advises parents to test their children for drugs and alcohol, then order them to quit, or else.

graders and 40 percent of ninth-graders reported in a 2003 survey that they'd gone binge-drinking within the past month); and third, some lose their way and even their lives. Anyone who doubts this should check out Mill Valley's Saturday morning meeting of Al-Anon, the self-help program for parents and friends of alcoholics and addicts. This particular meeting, held every week in a Methodist church hall, is heavily attended by parents, their children – in rehab, on the streets, in jail or in some softer form of trouble – have crossed the ill-defined line between experimentation and addiction.

But exactly where is that line? And how can parents decide where to draw it? When things first start to go south in a family – a 15-year-old tells his parents that he smoked hashish for the first time in 5th grade, for instance, or bottles of tequila and vodka start disappearing regularly from the liquor cabinet – few parents want to come down like Attila the Hun. When things go way south – a 16-year-old's grades drop from Bs to Ds, and her eyes stay red and she drops out of school, and parental yelling and grounding and room searches and paraphernalia confiscations and surprise drug tests get nowhere – those same parents may find themselves frightened and

utterly at sea. In the past eight years, 500 to 600 families have turned to Larry Fritzlan, founder of Adolescent Recovery Services of Corte Madera. He specializes in teaching parents how to draw the line.

Fritzlan is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist with years of experience – both personal and professional – in addiction. He is the only local therapist in private practice offering a comprehensive, multilevel drug treatment program for teenagers and their families. He maintains that it's always possible for parents to "create an environment where a teen chooses to stop using." His manner is deceptively genial. He doesn't yell like a drill sergeant, or bust up bars like Carrie Nation. He works calmly and relentlessly, helping parents construct a logical box that makes getting clean and sober look like a teenager's best alternative.

Fritzlan, who lives in Mill Valley, is 64 but looks younger than that. He has short dark hair and an easy manner. In an earlier life, he owned East West Leather in San Francisco, drank a lot of alcohol and smoked a lot of pot. He's been clean and sober since the age of 39, and for the past eight years he's made it his mission to give teenagers the second chance he got,

without waiting for them to lose a decade or two of their lives.

His waiting room, in a building next to the Corte Madera movie theater with a fountain in the courtyard, holds a couch, some copies of the *New Yorker* and car-enthusiast magazines, a white noise machine, a relief map of California, and a quote on the wall from TV's Dr. Phil that reads, in part, "Overindulgence is one of the most insidious forms of child abuse." There's also a stand holding his brochures, with this enigmatic sentence: "We can help you [the parents] create consequences that result in a teen choosing to stay clean and sober." When I met with him in late December to understand exactly what that sentence meant, I started by asking about his own family history.

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My father was an alcoholic, and he died a drunk at 56. I am a recovering alcoholic and addict. Before I got into recovery, I was living alone on the water in Sausalito, in an apartment on Bridgeway, often with the shades closed. I was running my store [East West Leather], coming home and using, and that was pretty much my life. I was hopeless, depressed, suicidal and frightened. My basic daily use was nicotine, caffeine, marijuana and alcohol. I did all the other drugs sequentially, recreationally, on top of, in addition to – amphetamines, speed, the opiates, cocaine, psychedelics – all the stuff [*leans into tape recorder for emphasis*] that is readily available in every Marin high school today.

I was 39 years old when I got into treatment, and I've been clean and sober since then. I soon realized the profound damage I'd done to myself as a result of 20-plus years of numbing myself, cutting myself off from psychological, emotional, social and intellectual development. I was probably an 18-year-old at 39 when I got sober.

In a sense I'm doing now what I wish had been done in my own

family – I wish someone had intervened in my family when I was a teenager, and put me and my dad in treatment. I was already having blackouts, driving under the influence.

Since you started Adolescent Recovery Services eight years ago, you've had to add three other therapists to keep up with demand. Were you surprised?

I still feel like we are only reaching a small part of the potential population. I don't necessarily think that there are more kids on drugs nowadays, but kids are using more and different kinds of drugs – Oxycontin, cocaine and ecstasy are pretty potent. We know more now – because parents are drug-testing their kids – and at the same time, better treatment is available. Adolescent use and treatment are both simultaneously coming out of the closet.

Parents drug-testing kids?

[*Matter-of-factly*] You can go to Walgreen's or your corner drugstore and buy kits.

Now that's a shocking idea, especially here, where there are strong civil liberties values – what's your stand on it?

Roughly 10 percent of teenagers are going to develop drug addiction or alcoholism. That's a serious, potentially fatal disease. So the question really is what do we do if our child is exhibiting regular drug or alcohol use? That question is leading parents to drug test.

You actually recommend it to people?

In treatment with us, teenagers have to stop using all drugs and alcohol, and the only way we know they've stopped is by testing them. We use urine testing, saliva testing and breathalyzers.

Can you give me an example?

I run a weekly peer group for teenagers in recovery. Many of them have returned home after a

time in a wilderness program or residential treatment. Clinically, it's a psychotherapy group, where there's guidance and suggestions and conversations about the consequences of relapse and how to stay clean and sober. They have sponsors, they're going to regular AA meetings, and they're doing service, like making the coffee or helping set up, and some of them are sponsors to other people in recovery.

One kid in the group is 10 months clean and sober, and the next one is nine months, then it's nine months, eight months and on down. The new kid comes in, possibly arrogant and in denial, dazed and confused. They get confronted by the kids who are now clean and sober and valuing the treatment process. After a while the new guy becomes the old guy to confront the next guy. They get to support each other in forming new friends, healthy clean friends.

At first, the new guy wants to continue to hang around the kids that are still using drugs. After a month or so he notices that these friends smoke dope and say they want to do a bunch of things, but don't actually *do* anything, and the kid is finding that totally boring. In three or four months, they've made decisions not to hang out with people who are using and they've gone back to the old friends they had, who are not in trouble with drugs. I'm not sure I answered your question.

About drug testing.

I often give them a urine or saliva test when we meet. They are also expected to blow into a breathalyzer in front of their parents when they come home from a party or from being out.

Sounds just like the cops. I've heard parents say, "We want to keep the lines of communication open." Does that close them?

It's an excellent question. It points out the tension between wanting to trust your kid – and some

kids are mature enough to handle it – and knowing what to do with a kid who is using drugs and alcohol on a daily basis and is in need of medical help, when it has become a serious health and safety issue.

Marin has double the national per capita income. It also has twice as much teen binge drinking as the rest of the country. Is this an outgrowth of our reputation for liberalism and affluence?

I don't think Marin is any different from say, Danville or Palo Alto. That said, many Marin County parents are indulgent. As in a lot of places, both parents are often working and unavailable, and the kids are left alone a lot. Beyond that you can't over generalize. Some parents are right on top of this issue.

Other factors?

Drugs cost money. No dealer is giving them away. In Marin County, there is so much money that procurement is not an issue. Kids can afford a \$50 a day cocaine or marijuana or Oxycontin habit.

Whew. Other factors?

There are parents in Marin who are pretty liberal about their kids smoking pot and drinking, and even get high with their kids. I think this is pretty dumb. No doctor or educator has suggested that this promotes proper growth. I think it's the parents' problem, and the kid suffers for it.

Research shows that kids who don't smoke cigarettes until they reach 18 probably will not start. By 18, the kid is more mature and less likely to do stupid things. But if there's the attitude that you can smoke dope at 14 and it's OK with your parents, there's probably no reason why that 14-year-old won't turn 18 and 24 and 34 continuing to use the same drugs.

I've heard people say, "I want my kids to make mistakes so they can learn from them."

There's a fine line. Would you allow your daughter to drive her new Mercedes into the Tenderloin to buy Oxycontin, which is basically the same as heroin, so that she can deal it at high school? Would you want her using it herself on a daily basis for a few months to be able to figure it out?

Aaah – no. That's scary.

Experimenting is natural and normal. To go back to pot for a minute. There is some research suggesting that teens who experimented with pot were *more* successful in life than those that never did experiment. But experimentation is defined as once or twice. Michael Riera, the granddaddy of adolescent psychology [*opens closet, takes out Uncommon Sense for Parents of Teenagers*], says experimentation is never more than once a month.

Clinically, pot is called an "a-motivational" drug. It takes away motivation. I read this somewhere – "pot turns our brightest teenagers into average teenagers, our average teenagers into those that struggle, and those that struggle into being almost incapable of taking care of themselves." There's a cost.

So what happens when a family comes in?

The family is typically quite frightened. They love their child. They see their child doing really unusual, possibly dangerous things – stealing the car, climbing out the window in the middle of the night, hanging out with some scary people, being obviously intoxicated. They want help and they're scared.

And what do you do?

The first goal is to immediately stop all alcohol and drugs. This is not talk therapy. This is not counseling. This is drug and alcohol treatment. I tell them: We're going to drug test you, you're probably going to be positive, no big deal. The expectation is that it will stop and it will stay stopped. Or you will end up in more

intensive treatment, possibly even residential.

Which won't be as much fun as living at home in Marin, am I right?

That's correct. Probably every kid in this county knows somebody who knows somebody, who has had their kid sent to a wilderness program, who has lived under a tarp in the snow.

I wish I could take back the tarp under the snow part. These are not boot camps. They're therapeutic and very well supervised, they last six weeks to 60 days, and they usually involve a group leaving a base camp with counselors and trekking in wilderness areas, in unfamiliar terrain, at high altitudes and in unpredictable weather, carrying everything they need – their food, water, journals etc. There may be a time to be alone for a day or so and reflect. It's a wonderful time-out for a kid. They're in nature, away from their iPods and their peer culture and their parents, and drugs, and they have to deal with the here and now in very real terms. If they're defiant and they don't roll their pack up correctly and it rains, they have to deal with the fact that it's wet. They learn tremendous self-responsibility and they come back with so much pride.

Usually the kids go off hating their parents, but when they've been gone for two months – hmmm, I get tears of joy just thinking about it – the kids are coming back to base camp, and they come around the bend, and down in the valley are all the parents. The program films the kids running to their parents and crying and hugging them. It's an emotional experience that isn't going to last forever, but it's indicative of the radical change that's occurred.

But not all kids need something this radical – and expensive?

Look, we need to differentiate between kids who are experimenting

with drugs, and those for whom experimentation has gotten out of hand. One will outgrow it. The other could die from it.

[In treatment] those that can stop will stop. Treatment is relatively brief; it could be a couple, three months. There'll be drug testing. The kids are going to prove that they can control this, and about two-thirds do. They're going to get smart. They're not going to do it any more and if they do it they're going to do it in a way that the parents don't know. That basically means they can control it.

We know we have a problem when the kid can't stop. Ten percent of the population is going to become alcoholic and drug-addicted, and it almost always starts in adolescence.

It sounds like a home-grown version of court diversion. On the adult level, they say, "Well, you can go into drug treatment or jail." If they're 16 or 17, Larry Fritzlán says the pint-sized version of the same thing! Don't a lot of parents feel helpless, though?

Back up a little bit. If there's kid sitting on the sofa over there and I say, you have a choice, to stop drinking or end up in a year program. They have to make their decision, but it's not dissimilar to the decision presented when a wife says to her husband, you go to Betty Ford or I get a divorce.

No smoking pot on the weekend at a party?

No wine at weddings.

Can parents do that without becoming the Gestapo?

That's the deal. That's the treatment contract. [*hands me a copy*]

And the kid signs it?

It almost doesn't matter if he signs it. The parents have said you will stop doing drugs or there will be consequences. We've hired Larry Fritzlán to help us with this,

he's got consequences, and we're going to back him up. For those kids whose use is out, there are the teams of 300-pound Samoans who show up at 3 in the morning and escort the individual to a rehab or a therapeutic boarding school or a wilderness treatment program.

The problem is that a lot of parents want to go from ignoring the problem totally to sending the kid off to a rehab. The places love to get the money. And guess what? The kid comes back and within days, starts using again. It's sort of sad. A lot of families could have come to local treatment first and avoided spending \$50,000. The component that is missing when parents scapegoat their child like that is what? Themselves! Duh! The parents haven't gotten support for changing *their* behavior, which in a lot of cases was somewhat associated with how the problem got to be a problem in the first place.

Are you talking about what's called enabling?

Parents are "enabling" the use to continue when, in a sense, they are saying, "It's OK to use drugs, I may nag and scold but there will be no consequence of your continued drug and alcohol use." Nagging is not treatment.

Can you give me a specific example of what drives parents to come to you?

How about a teenager who walks into his parents' house, spits on the wall, knocks some furniture over and calls his father a f___ing faggot? And his mother a _____?

How about an example I can use in the paper?

Kids will do anything. They're screaming for boundaries, for some sort of limit-setting, for some sort of container. Their narcissism and grandiosity have filled their universe, and their parents have totally abandoned them to it. Whether it's the police, whether it's me, they're looking for some sort of containment.

"This is not talk therapy. This is not counseling. This is drug and alcohol treatment. I tell them: We're going to drug test you... The expectation is that it will stop and it will stay stopped. Or you will end up in more intensive treatment, possibly even residential."

Haven't the parents already punished and threatened to no avail?

The teenager often comes in here grounded. The parents won't let them get their driver's license – and I tell the parents, give it all back! If the kid is willing to stay clean and sober and submit to drug testing and come to counseling, there's no reason to penalize them! However, if they're not willing to do that, yeah! Not only take away their cell phone and their iPod, take away their internet connection and IM capabilities, and the computer in their room – they can have a computer on the dining room table if the parents take the cord to bed with them at night – they lose all of that. They lose the door to their bedroom!

The kid is really at total choice here. Nothing is imposed upon them. They're citizens. They have free will. They're not locked up in jail. I tell them straight up – here's your choice, kid. You can get your parents' love and trust back, you can get your cell phone back, you can

get your curfew back and get off grounding, but what you've got to do is to agree to stop all drug and alcohol use, and agree to come to counseling here and to be drug tested. You've got a choice here. Which one do you want to do?

That's a hell of a choice. Do you ever have parents who say they're signed on, but when push comes to shove they just can't take away the toys or send the kid to treatment?

It's very sad. The kid gets worse. Another crisis occurs. And at some point most parents will reach out for help. I suggest they go to Al-Anon, which is a place where parents can learn to say no, follow through on consequences, and grow a spine. Unfortunately, there are also parents who are themselves mentally ill, whose marriage is in such shambles that they don't have the resources to treat their kid, and who have their own drug and alcohol problems.

A book called *Smashed* was on the bestseller list last year. The author, Koren Zailckas, is 24. She describes binge drinking her way through high school and college in an expensive Boston suburb somewhat like Marin – she had to have her stomach pumped out at 15, and she suffered blackouts and woke up in strange beds – but she doesn't define herself as an alcoholic.

The headline in the *IJ* recently was about the two teenagers who died in a car crash when they ran into a tree. Drunk. [*pauses*] That could have been that girl. I'm alive and well and very successful and healthy and happy. I dodged the bullet. That girl dodged the bullet. Many don't. Many of us get picked off along the way – fall off the bridges and off the paths and run into trees and other cars and become pregnant, get AIDS.

If I had my way, I, the parents, the drug and alcohol treatment programs, the 12-step programs, residential treatment programs, wilderness programs, therapeutic boarding schools are all going to work together to make sure that this kid makes it to 18 with all their fingers and toes attached.

Then what happens at 18?

They're adults. We have to let them start to make their own decisions.

If they start using then?

A lot of them do, moderately. But if they've had treatment, it's like they've been inoculated. Their brains have had a chance to develop without being stoned. And they have been educated, they know what the warning signs are, and that there's treatment available if they get into trouble.

And if they get into real trouble?

I often say to parents of a stoner, "Your kid is 18 and you can't legally send them away [to treatment] any more. But you can create consequences that may get them to stop using. You can tell them they have to get out of the house – And, oh, by the way, leave the car keys and the cell phone, and don't step onto our property unless you get clean and sober." Many kids will seek help when confronted with this choice.

And when they're over 21?

At some point, hopefully there's a shift – you're no longer relating parent to child, but adult to adult. If you're still *parenting* a kid at 22 ... [*pauses*] Look, a woman once called me saying, "I hear you're an interventionist. My son has got a terrible drinking problem – he's crashed cars, he's nearly burned my house down, he got so drunk last night – I've had it!" She

sounded like a little Italian lady in her 80s. Finally I asked, how old is this guy? He was 60-some years old, he was still living with her and she was still trying to control him!

How about a success story?

I'm thinking of one kid – I can talk about this because his mother has written an article on our Web site – who began smoking pot and drinking when he was 13. His parents were divorced, and whenever he wanted to make his mother back off, he would threaten to go live with his father. He became sullen, withdrawn, belligerent and deeply depressed. He dropped out of school. When he was 17, his mother found an empty bottle of rum in his room, and on another occasion, LSD. Then he took her ATM card and stole money from her, and when she confronted him, he let her know how desperate he felt. She brought him to see me.

When he fully realized that this was a drug treatment program, he melted down in the parking lot of my office building, screaming, on the verge of violence. She told him that if he refused to go into treatment, she would call the police and have him arrested for theft and drug possession. She would get his driver's license revoked. But she would not give up on him.

He calmed down and got in the car. She said, "So tomorrow night we will meet here for our first family counseling session?" He replied, "You are not giving me a choice, are you?" and she said, "No." He's now in his mid-20s. He's a great person, he's been clean and sober for seven or eight years, he sponsors others, and he graduated with honors from Cal.

It sounds like some of these parents go through fire. What's the payoff for them?

How about seeing your kid make it?