

About Health with Jeanne Blake
Recovery High Schools
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JEANNE BLAKE: Welcome to *About Health* I'm Jeanne Blake. Getting clean and sober if you are addicted to alcohol or other drugs is challenging of any age that's because of peer pressure, availability and the cultures that young people are growing up in.

On this edition of *About Health* we're going to talk about recovery high schools, which are a safe place for young people in recovery to get an education. We're joined on this edition of *About Health* by Michelle Lipinski who is the principal of North Shore Recovery High School in Beverly, Massachusetts and Lieutenant Willy Ostiguy who is a friend of mine, I'm proud to say, who is the head of the employee assistance program at the Boston Fire Department and for whom Ostiguy Recovery High School in Boston is named. And by the way, in just a few minutes we'll be joined by some of the students enrolled in recovery high schools.

Willy this is really your baby. You brought recovery high schools to Massachusetts. Tell us how that came to be?

WILLY: The way it came about was our members, meaning the Boston Fire Department and their children, were put into recovery and when they were coming out of recovery, we put them back into their respective high schools and 90% of them were relapsing which is the norm.

JEANNE BLAKE: It is the norm nationally.

WILLY: But for us to think at that point that they were going to have some success in the same setting would have been ridiculous.

JEANNE BLAKE: So, and by the way, the numbers in just 2003, 3,000 adolescents just in Massachusetts alone went through publicly funded treatment facilities and so that's a ton of young people who are needing service like this. So you learned of a model in Minnesota? Correct?

WILLY: I learned about the model in Minnesota. I've heard about it for a while. I ended up calling Minnesota, Sobriety High School is the name of the school, and they have 10 high schools in Minnesota and they've been in business since 1999.

JEANNE BLAKE: So they've got a track record?

WILLY: They've got a track record. They've got a good curriculum. They've got some good, it's a good school system in a safe setting for these kids. So we brought it back. We went to the City Council. We went to the Commission on Substance Abuse. They picked it up finally after a couple of years of swimming upstream. Nobody did not think that it was the biggest problem in the schools because nobody could fund it and nobody really knew how to address it. We gave them a model on how to address it. They actually flew somebody in from Minnesota to discuss the financial aspect of it. Senator Tolman picked it up and Lieutenant Governor Healy and it went from there. The other side of it was listening when you were talking. You're saying 3,000 kids. Think about the fact that 90% of these kids never get treatment. So there's another whole population that never even get up to bat.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's right. The treatment is so difficult to access and to be able to afford it and then young people that manage to hide their abuse until they get older. Willy, you have a personal interest in having young people get treatment early. Do you want to share that?

WILLY: Share my personal interest?

JEANNE BLAKE: Do you?

WILLY: My personal interest to see these kids naturally be successful. I was saying to Michelle, I got out of Boston English 40 years ago. 2,400 boys and there was probably 200 of us walking around a little bit out of sorts almost on a given day. And nothing much has changed. When I talk to the folks from Minnesota, we found at that there was two or three kids from Boston going to school there. And I found that kind of sad, we're supposed to be the hub of education, and three of our kids have to go to school in Minnesota to be a in a safe, sober setting.

JEANNE BLAKE: And you have been recovered for many, many years.

WILLY: 35 years.

JEANNE BLAKE: 35 years, congratulations. And if you had an opportunity like this back then, you told me that things might have been different for you.

WILLY: They may have. That might just be the flip of a coin because at that age I wasn't making good choices but at least there would have been an alternative. I think

this is a good alternative for kids. I don't think it's going to be for everybody, but I think some kids, Minnesota, in a sense has shown us. They have 600 kids, 90% of them are graduating, 50% are going on to higher education. These kids would have been thrown away.

JEANNE BLAKE: Michelle, you came to us by being the director of an alternative program in a high school. Explain how you, and now you are the principal of the recovery high school as I said, how did you make that choice?

MICHELLE: I kind of feel like it found me. I wasn't really looking for it. Back in February when all this was coming to fruition, an old superintendent of mine, Dr. Herb Levine, asked me if I'd go out to lunch with him. I met him for lunch and he brought this all to the table, literally to the table, and I kind of went back and I thought about it and kind of going back and forth and I know that if I went through and there was actually a job posting in May and I still wasn't totally set on it because I've been with the system for 12 years and was very happy where I was and, but I started looking outside of myself. One of my current students was coming back from treatment and she spent two days, and when I say she spent two days with me, she was next to me for two full days while I was teaching, while I was doing whatever I was doing with the alternative education setting. At the end of the second day she looked at me and she started crying and said, "I can't be here. I can't be here. This isn't safe for me. I've seen five things go down." I mean she had seen a lot more than we as educators or administrators in our high school were able to see and she was hypersensitive to it and she really didn't want to use.

JEANNE BLAKE: So that had a profound effect on you.

MICHELLE: That and like I said I became hypersensitive to looking around for other students who were also struggling. One of my students, Frank, who is with me right now, also came from the alternative education setting and it was difficult for him and so having this input from a couple of students who are really struggling cannot use in that setting. When I thought I was really vigilant, and had people arrested for having drugs, I really thought I was on top of it and I really wasn't even on the brink of a crest because I couldn't even.

JEANNE BLAKE: So we are going to hear from the students in a minute but just what is it like to be in that environment now and in a recovery high school? That must be incredibly, I would think, in a way, uplifting?

MICHELLE: It's emotional every single day. It's really high, highs and really low, lows and we see every phase of these students in recovery. From one month to a year and a half and it's everything. It's all those things and me the courage that these students have and the community that they build.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's what I'm thinking about too. That sense of community. That must be really wonderful to be a part of.

MICHELLE: Yes, and it's a fantastic job but it isn't without a lot of back-breaking emotional baggage that come along with it.

JEANNE BLAKE: Really, you worked so hard to get Ostiguy High brought to Boston, and I know that you are a bit shy about the fact that it was named after you, how

do you feel about that? All these years later, and I'm sure all the hard work that you've done the last few years to make it a reality?

WILLY: I'm actually very happy about it. Like I said, I try to stay ____ I try to be humble to a degree, whatever degree I can reach with that. I think, you've got three schools now, Beverly, Springfield and Boston.

JEANNE BLAKE: In Massachusetts?

WILLY: You've got the Cape, New Bedford, Lowell all looking for schools. We've gotten some different reactions. With a funny reaction, I was talking to the principal from Ostiguy High, Roger Olson, and he had a mother come in with her daughter and she wanted the daughter to go to school. And then when they started to do the criteria for the school, substance free, 30 days clean, the child didn't have a problem. The mother just wanted her in a safe setting where there was no alcohol or drugs. And there isn't, in the mother's opinion, one that exists in Massachusetts.

JEANNE BLAKE: Wow, well I guess there isn't, that says a lot. We've got the criteria, the student eligibility on the screen right now and I just want to mention that we discussed Massachusetts and Minnesota but there are also recovery high schools in Michigan, in Arizona, in Colorado, in Washington, Texas, Wisconsin, Washington, D.C, and Tennessee, eleven states so far and hopefully there will be a lot more because so many young people need this kind of help.

WILLY: We are going to sit with New York next week.

JEANNE BLAKE: Fantastic.

WILLY: And Rhode Island.

JEANNE BLAKE: Fantastic. Well want to thank you for taking time to explain how Recovery High came to be here and a little bit about what it feels like to be there and now we'll hear from the students. So, thank you so much Michelle and Lieutenant Ostiguy and we'll be back in just one moment to hear from some of the young people who are benefiting from the experience of Recovery High.

JEANNE BLAKE: We continue our conversation now on *About Health* about recovery high schools and we're joined for this part of the program by Kim and by Adam who are both in recovery and first of all congratulations for making a choice to get clean and sober and thanks for coming in to tell us a little bit of your story. Kim, tell us why you decided to go to Recovery High.

KIM: I had a very bad drug problem and I got put in rehab and I knew that if I had gone back to my old school that I would have relapsed.

JEANNE BLAKE: How did you know that?

KIM: Because all of my friends that used. I never used with anybody but the friends in my school.

JEANNE BLAKE: And so you think that it would have been their pressure on you, or do you think it would have been, help us understand from the point of view of someone who's in recovery, what that pressure feels like?

KIM: Cuz when you're in high school, you want to hang out with all the cool kids and stuff and you don't want to, like if I had gone back to that school and been by myself, because I'm committed to staying clean then, and I would have wanted to hang out with all of my friends then I would have just been extremely depressed because I wouldn't have any friends.

JEANNE BLAKE: It's like Michelle described the student who lasted two days and said I can't do this. Adam, you're sitting there and nodding your head. You're agreeing with what Kim says. Tell us a little bit about your decision.

ADAM: A lot like Kim's. I was in rehab. They came in and talked to us about and I thought it would be a good idea. I also knew that if I went back to my regular high school that the first kids I would talk to and hang out with would be my old friends who I would drink and smoke with and do all that stuff with.

JEANNE BLAKE: And you were a football player so it meant for you giving up a year of football which I think speaks to your commitment of staying clean and sober. Tell me about that decision and what's at stake for you and why you want so badly to stay clean and sober?

ADAM: I like football a lot so, last year I was playing football I knew that it affected me a lot so I knew that if I had kept doing what I was doing, then I would have ended up

completely stopping. Like a lot of my old using buddies, they played football with me and they don't even play this year.

JEANNE BLAKE: I just don't think that young people think about how drugs and alcohol and other drugs affects their performance on the field, their performance in the classroom, am I right? Help us understand? What's the mentality of young people who are using and not acknowledging that or understanding it or knowing it?

ADAM: A lot of people think that they can get by with doing drugs and keep up their grades and just do good all around but in the long run it's gonna affect you a lot more than you think it is.

JEANNE BLAKE: What kind of reaction have you had from your friends at your old school? Have you been in touch with them since you went into rehab?

ADAM: When I would come home on passes, they were the ones I would hang out with. They were the first ones I would call. And then when I got out, I hung out with them for a few weeks I just kind of drifted away from them because I have other friends who don't do anything, drink or smoke. So they're really the ones I have to call and talking to and hanging out with. My other friends, I don't think that they care that I don't talk to them anymore.

JEANNE BLAKE: What does that say about their friendship, right? Kim, you're saying uh, huh, tell me a little bit about it?

KIM: I have a couple friends that I used with that I was friends with before so I know that they actually care about me but a lot of times when you're using and drinking, there's people that you hang with or only want to hang out with you because you have drugs or because you have money and misery loves company and they just want to bring you down and they want to use you for everything you're worth.

JEANNE BLAKE: So what's it like at Recovery High and why is that, is it working for you guys? I don't mean working like helping you stay clean and sober but I mean, do you like it?

BOTH: Yes.

JEANNE BLAKE: And tell me what you like about Recovery High?

ADAM: It's a lot different than my old high school. At my old high school there was a lot more kids so it was a lot easier to get distracted, like get away from my work and stuff and all my friends were there so I would usually go and leave but now here, it's in a complete different city so I don't know a lot of people so if I'm gonna hang out with kids it's usually the kids from the school and we all do the same stuff now.

JEANNE BLAKE: And when you say stuff, you don't mean stuff you mean your activities and what's the support like Kim? What's the support like that you get from your fellow students?

KIM: It's awesome because they all know what you're going through. They all know like the emotional things that come with it. Like all my other friends don't

understand that so it's really good to wake up and be able to know that you're going to go somewhere that if you're having a bad day that you want to be there because if I was having a bad day, I wouldn't want to go to my old school, I'd stay home and I'd get high but here if I'm having a bad day, I'd want to go to the school so I can talk about it to people.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's fantastic. Okay, two really good testimonies for helping me understand recovery high schools. So we are going to take another break and we're going to bring Brian on, so Adam I want to thank you and Kim you're going to stay with us for a few more minutes and we'll be right back.

JEANNE BLAKE: We continue our discussion about recovery high schools now with Kim who's been with us and we're joined now by Brian, welcome Brian. Congratulations! Tell us a bit about your decision to go to recovery high school?

BRIAN: Well it kind of started last year when I was in different school in the south and I was in a program for a little while for basic drug use so I got out and I started out hanging out with my old friends and I went right back to what I was doing and I went into a program that I've been in for like six months now and so at the end of the year last year Michelle said she was going to start a recovery high school I decided to join it and over the summer I just started helping her and got acquainted with all the kids and now I have good friends there.

JEANNE BLAKE: That's fantastic. So what happens in that moment that you make a decision that you want to go there and you know you are making a commitment for staying clean?

ADAM: I don't know, it's just like I'm 17 now and I should start growing up. I look at a lot of my old friends and the 18-year olds and their whole goal in life is to smoke weed, drink and get by on welfare and that's not what I want.

JEANNE BLAKE: What do you want?

ADAM: Success of some kind. I'm not sure. I'd like to go to college at some point.

JEANNE BLAKE: Good for you. Kim take us inside North Shore Recovery High and help us understand what a day is like there? What I mean is how different from the traditional high school?

KIM: We have the same classes and the same electives and stuff but during the day we have a wellness or a 12 step group which is in the wellness group you talk about feelings and stuff kind of like therapy but it's like a therapy group kind of and in the 12 step group they talk about the steps and what to do with them.

JEANNE BLAKE: Every day you have a 12-step meeting?

KIM: No, every day we either have a wellness or the 12 steps.

JEANNE BLAKE: And so I'm going to be very sort of technical about this. What time does your day start and what time does it end?

KIM: It starts at 9:00 and it ends at 3:05.

JEANNE BLAKE: So it's like a traditional school day? Brian, I know that if you do need all the requirements that you would need at a traditional high school, correct? Help us understand; kind of walk us through that?

BRIAN: Well we're taking the MCAS; we're taking the SAT's tomorrow. We have diplomas from our high school that we came from. It's pretty much you get everything you need and it's in a safe environment. It's a lot smaller and so, there's like 6 kids in a class and they'll teach them what they want to learn and so we kind of get engrossed in what we're learning and it's like a private school, but it's not because it's such a small student to teacher ratio.

JEANNE BLAKE: It sounds fantastic. What would you say to a student who is sort of on the break of making a decision by whether he or she wanted to make a commitment to attend a recovery school?

KIM: I would tell them that they should at least take the chance because it's better to do something and then to not do it and regret that you didn't do it. That's actually what I would say.

JEANNE BLAKE: And Brian, for those who say, gosh, I don't know if I can get clean, it's really hard, I don't know if I'm ready?

BRIAN: It's really up to you if you want to get clean and if you want to, it's the best way to do it.

JEANNE BLAKE: How do you feel differently about yourself today than you did a year ago?

BRIAN: I feel smatter, I feel like I achieve things. Like, I look at some of my old friends I used to hang out with they come over and they're high and they're just laughing at everything, stumbling all over the place, to them they're having a good time. To me they're just stupid and that's not what I want to be.

JEANNE BLAKE: How about you Kim? How do you feel differently than you did when you were using?

KIM: I feel like I have a lot more self-respect for myself. Like I used to always like swear and do stupid things and scare my parents and I would just make myself look like a complete fool. Like Brian was saying about how your friends and stuff like they just make themselves look like a complete fool and if you look at them, and you're like wow, that's what I used to look like.

BRIAN: That was you a little while ago.

KIM: Yeah, it was scary.

JEANNE BLAKE: Did your parents know that you were using?

BRIAN: I never told them but I think they kind of knew.

JEANNE BLAKE: Why do you think that so many parents don't do anything about it when kids are using?

BRIAN: I think they don't want to accept it. A lot of them don't want to accept it. Parents just don't want to admit that half the kids in the school skip class and go out into the woods and smoke and come back in high as hell to the classes. Parents don't want to admit that because if they're staying out until 2:00 in the morning, they can't be smoking weed because their kid's just not that kind of kid.

JEANNE BLAKE: Why do you think it's so scary for them to accept that or admit it?

BRIAN: I don't know. Maybe because they don't, it's the path of failure, it won't kill you a lot of drugs, some will but they all lead to failure.

JEANNE BLAKE: So this is a broader question, but in the work that I've been doing the last few years on underage drinking and drugs among young people, I have to say that I've been alarmed. I hear the numbers but the numbers don't mean anything until you get into the schools and you find out how widespread drug use is and how incredibly available drugs are to young people in the school hallways. So what would you hope, this will be the last question because we are out of time, but what would you hope that the traditional schools would do to try to clean things up a little bit and make traditional schools a safer place for people?

BRIAN: Get real. When there's a kid standing in the corner of the hallway for 20 minutes and people walking up to him saying hey, what's up, then leaving, you might

want to be suspicious of that kid, simple stuff like that, they don't look at it like they really should look at it.

JEANNE BLAKE: Kim, your words to people about how we can make the schools a safer environment for young people?

KIM: Basically what Brian said. I mean a lot of the adults are really in denial and they just really need to open their eyes and if you see some kid standing there for 20 minutes, people just walk by that and they need to have teachers and principals who will open their eyes to that.

JEANNE BLAKE: It is about saving lives. That's what it boils down to. I know that in my community there have been a lot of deaths from overdose and I know that you must know young people your age, do you that have died from overdose?

KIM: Yes.

JEANNE BLAKE: What's that like for someone your age to have known young people that died and we all know that it could have been you because you were using?

BRIAN: To be honest, it's kind of scary, but I'm kind of glad because it wasn't me.

JEANNE BLAKE: There's a lot to be grateful for. Kim?

KIM: Just want Brian said. But it really is scary, especially like when you're getting clean and you see somebody else who got high and then the sickness in your head is like, oh, where did they get that from? Like I want to go get that?

JEANNE BLAKE: Getting clean is hard. It's hard work.

BRIAN: It's a sickness.

JEANNE BLAKE: Well that's a very important note to end on. That addiction is a disease of the brain, it's an illness, it's not a lack of willpower and I give you both so much credit and Adam as well for the work that you're doing and Willy and Michelle over there, hat's off to you, I give you a lot of credit. Thank you so much for coming on the program and sharing your stories and I hope that others will hear this so it can benefit them and that they will ask for the help that they need. The Association of Recovery Schools. If you do a search for that on-line you'll find the Association. It lists every recovery school in the country and so hopefully there will be one near you if you or someone that you love could benefit from it. I'm Jeanne Blake and thank you so much for joining us on this edition of *About Health*.

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