

# Authentic Voices: Stories from Recovery School Students

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**ABSTRACT.** One of the central elements of 12-step recovery is the story. Every member of a 12-step group has one and is expected to share it. These stories are told in full “speaker” meetings, but also in increments as people share “experience, strength, and hope.” The story of a “newcomer” evolves over time to become the fully developed story of an “old-timer.” Gradually, stories stop emphasizing “how it was” and are able to focus more upon the lessons learned and “how it is today.” One powerful aspect of recovery stories is that they tend to help the sobriety of both the listener *and* the teller.

This chapter is not a work of research but rather the narration of eight students from recovery schools. Each was posed with a different question to address about their recovery school experience. Each was also asked to share brief pieces of their personal recovery stories as an introduction. These are the same students who participated in the online meetings annotated later in the volume, and last names have been removed in the tradition of AA, of which each student is a member. The intent is to represent an “authentic voice” of recovery schools that is genuine more than analytic. While all eight students believe recovery schools have been integral to their sustained recovery, the point of these stories is not necessarily to draw conclusions. Rather, it is to allow the reader a glimpse inside the walls of a recovery school . . . to hear the types of stories staff members and peer

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students hear everyday. Indeed, it is stories like the ones that follow that keep many of these staff and students coming back day after day, and they serve as a testament to what recovery schools can be. The editors of this journal could think of no better way to introduce a volume on recovery in educational communities.

## ***STUDENT REPRESENTATION***

Students were chosen in an effort to balance the perspectives between high schools and colleges. They are presented here in two sections: first high school students, then college students. Within each section, the student stories are in alphabetical order by first name. The question each student was asked to answer is listed before the response.

The high schools represented include the following:

Archway Academy (Houston, Texas)  
 Northshore Recovery School (Beverly, Massachusetts)  
 Sobriety High (Maplewood, Minnesota)  
 Solace Academy (Chaska, Minnesota)

The colleges represented include:

Augsburg College (Minneapolis, Minnesota)  
 Case Western Reserve University (Cleveland, Ohio)  
 Rutgers University (New Brunswick, New Jersey)  
 Texas Tech University (Lubbock, Texas)

In order to protect anonymity, we have removed the names of schools as directly connected to students.

## ***HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS***

### ***Dena B.***

*What made you select a recovery high school instead of returning to your former school? Did you think going to a non-recovery high school was an option?*

I was eleven years old the first time I got drunk. I have a bar in my basement where my grandpa keeps all the alcohol he hasn't even touched

in years. So my friend and I decided we wanted to try it, and we figured he would never notice anything was missing. We snuck a bottle of Jack Daniels over to her house that night, and after I took that first sip and felt my throat and stomach starting to get warm, I knew I liked it. My friend spit it out right away and thought it was disgusting. But I loved it and kept drinking until I started to get really sick, and her mother sent me home. I spent the rest of the night throwing up. After that, I decided that now that I had tried it and knew what it was like, I shouldn't drink anymore.

It was Christmas, and I was thirteen. Every Christmas, my grandparents and I went over to my aunt's house for dinner, and usually after that, my cousins would take me to a movie and then drive around to look at Christmas lights. As we were driving around looking at lights, my cousins started smoking weed in the car, and when it got passed around to me, I just took a hit without thinking—like it was just the right thing to do. I liked the feeling of getting high. So I started smoking a lot of pot throughout eighth grade and the beginning of ninth.

After a while, though, I had to smoke more and more, because it would barely get me high anymore. The summer before 10th grade, I started hanging out with new friends and older guys. I went to a club one night and tried coke for the first time. I loved that, too. That night, I left with two guys that I just met. I didn't call my grandparents or even bother to tell them I wouldn't be coming home.

On the drive to these guys' house, I found out they lived about two hours away from me, but they promised they would give me a ride home in the morning. We stayed up all night partying, and we decided to go swimming in a lake near their house. I almost drowned, but I thought I had the time of my life.

I snuck out of my house again a few weeks later to meet up with the same guys and go to their house again. I tried OxyContin for the first time there, and since then, I was off and running. I would lie, cheat, and steal just to get drugs. My grandparents eventually caught on, and I got arrested a few times, until finally the judge said I could not go home anymore and I needed to get help. They placed me in a DSS shelter until a bed opened up in a rehab. After I completed the rehab, I stayed an extra month because I did not think I was ready to go home yet. Then I went to a halfway house for three extra months, and finally came back home to live with my grandparents again. I've stayed sober since.

In May 2006, when I left the halfway house, I was still only 15 years old, so I was legally not allowed to drop out of high school yet. The courts told me I needed to figure out where I was going to go to school. My first

plan was just to not go anywhere until I turned 16, so I could drop out. My only options seemed to be to go back to my old high school or go to a charter school. Neither of those sounded good to me.

I knew if I went back to my old school, I would have to be around all of my old friends who still actively use, and I probably wouldn't have been able to stay sober longer than two weeks. And I just didn't like the idea of going to a charter school at all. Then one day, my grandmother saw an article in the newspaper about a recovery high school that would open in September 2006. Excited about this new possibility, we called every day to try to find more information about it, and eventually I was the first person accepted into the school. After more than six months here, I can safely say that for me, Recovery High is a much better option than any other school.

At Recovery High, I've made good, sober friends with whom I can have a good time without getting high. Also, at my new school, there are always people available for me when I need to talk. At my old school, there were no counselors you could talk to and barely any support. It seemed like people did not want to recognize the drug problem that was right in front of them.

At Recovery High, there are some staff members who are in recovery themselves and look out for the students. They know when to tell us that they are concerned about our behaviors, or when we are doing something that could potentially harm our recovery. In a regular high school, I would not have that option or the support. It's much easier to go to school with other kids my age who have all basically been through the same things and can relate to me if I am having an issue. In return, I can be there to help them if they need me, because sometimes just the fact that you helped another person can make you feel better.

Some non-recovery high schools claim that they have, or are trying to start, anti-drug programs. I know that when I went to regular high school, nobody took these programs seriously at all. People would come and preach about how bad drugs are, but never did they speak about their own experiences, or know at all first-hand what it's like to be sober or in recovery. Now at my school, when people visit we can listen to them and relate to them, because they've been through what we've been through.

I could not see myself at a non-recovery school at this point in my life. I don't think that I am far enough into my recovery to be thrown into a regular school again. It would only be harmful to me. Recovery High is exactly where I'm meant to be right now, and the teachers and students have been nothing but helpful to me.

**Jessica S.**

*What about attending a recovery high school has had the most valuable effect on your life?*

There are not enough words to express how much a recovery high school has affected my life. I have been attending a recovery high school for three years, and it has taught me so many things—things that I can take with me for the rest of my life.

Principles, gratitude, and honesty are a few things I have learned, but what I value most and has meant the most is being shown a new way to live. The staff and community at my recovery high school have helped me change my life around by knowing that I want to stay sober. Yes, there have been some ups and downs, times when I did not think I was going to be able to stay sober without the help of my recovery school. During those times, my recovery school was always in the back of my mind. If I [thought about using] drugs or [making] a bad decision, I would think about the consequences that I would have to face and how everyone would feel. They have shown me that my actions affect everyone in my school, not just myself. I always know the staff and my peers are there to fall back on if I need their help.

My recovery high school had a lasting effect on my academic career by teachers going out of their way to help me graduate. It has helped outside of school as well. It has taught me that I am able to handle things without using drugs or alcohol, and it has shown me constructive ways to manage my life. Attending a recovery school has helped change and shape my relationships with other people and my family members. It has shown me that I am able to have a healthy relationship with my peers and authority.

The staff have been there for me through thick and thin. They have always been so understanding of the disease of addiction and everything that it entails. They always have more patience with assignments and lessons. I have a more personal relationship with the staff, which really makes the environment more relaxed and more at home. They know when I'm having a hard time, when I need to talk to them about an issue, or when to be funny. It makes me want to keep coming back day after day.

I have realized that attending a recovery high school has made me grateful for all the things in my life thus far. It has made me grateful for the past and for the things that could come in the future. It has given me so many opportunities that I would never have had attending a normal public high school: speaking engagements, my trip to Washington DC,<sup>1</sup>

and speaking at the (state) capitol. It has helped my self-perception so much that I now have the ability to feel grateful about the things that I have.

I do not think I would have stayed sober at a normal public high school after getting out of treatment. My recovery high school has helped me succeed in everything that I have put my mind to. There should be more recovery schools in the United States to help more youth like myself just getting out of treatment, because I know it's saved my life.

### **J.R.**

*Describe how being a student in a recovery high school has impacted your relationships (positively or negatively) with people your age who are not in recovery. How has it changed your "out-of-school" time?*

It has been almost vital to my recovery to be in a recovery high school. I think that had I gone to my zoned high school I would probably not have stayed sober. It's hard enough to get sober with out being around it, and it's even worse when it's constantly being pushed your way.

I can remember being put in an Alternative Peer Group (APG) against my will. It sucked really bad. That's the least I can say. It really ruined my drugging. Every day I'd be pissed all day at school because I knew I could drug in school, but as soon as I got out of school, I went straight to my APG and would get busted regularly.

Then my parents put me in (my recovery school), and I HATED it. I missed all of my friends from my public school, and I couldn't easily get high at school anymore. Time went on, and I got sent to treatment. After three months there, I went back to (my recovery school), and I continued to get high. To shorten the story, I got desperate enough to ask for help, and (my recovery school) was there to hold a hand out.

Relating to my peers outside of school was nearly impossible for me to do without the use of drugs. I had no social skills on how to make a real friend; the only thing I knew was to get high. I actually came to find out that a lot of the kids I used to think were good friends disappeared as soon as I got sober.

I believe that overall, my relationships outside of recovery with my peers have improved, because I am someone that they can come to when they are ready to get sober. I am also there emotionally, which before was nearly impossible. I have friends at my zoned school that I still talk to occasionally, and they are glad that I am sober because they remember how messed up I was before I got sober.

When I told my story at my zoned school recently, I was amazed to see how many people came up to me and told me that they cared, and that they were glad to see me so happy. That means a lot.

Now, as far as my out-of-school time, I don't have much homework, so I can focus mainly on my recovery. Now, focusing on my recovery is not really a problem; but at first it was vital. I also have met a lot of kids I'm not sure I would have met had it not been for [my recovery school]. I have friends that I would take a bullet for now, and they would do the same for me. These are relationships that will last for as long as I live, and I will always remember them if we split apart.

The only thing that has kind of sucked about recovery high school is that A LOT of the kids who used to go there are gone, either graduated or got high and were removed from school. It sucks but it's all part of the game.

### ***Stefanie K.***

*Describe how a recovery school has supported your recovery. What challenges would you have faced attending your old school? Do you feel you have "missed out" on anything by attending a recovery high school?*

My name is Stefanie. I am an alcoholic and an addict. I have been clean and sober since April 11, 2005, thanks to the recovery high school I attend, my supportive family, the network of sober friends that I have today, and of course the 12-step program for alcoholics and addicts.

As with most other alcoholics and addicts, my story is very similar. I started out using drugs and alcohol at the young age of 12. I used on occasion. As time went by, occasion turned into weekends, to every few days, to daily. I started out just using pot and alcohol, but soon enough the high was not as good as in the beginning, so I moved on to so-called "bigger and better" drugs, such as pain killers, ecstasy, acid, mushrooms, Adderall, coke, etc.—basically anything that I could get my hands on that would give me that feeling of escaping.

Once I was about 13 or 14 years old, I started to get put into drug abuse programs because I started to ditch school and not care about my family or myself. I was constantly on the run from home, just trying to find that next high. I did have some legal consequences, such as minor consumptions and assault charges.

After a while it got to the point where I was on the run [15 years old] not knowing where I was going to stay that night and not really knowing what was going on around me. I felt so horrible inside, and all that I could

possibly want was to die. I wanted to stop using drugs and alcohol, but I had tried many times before, and I couldn't. I was completely hopeless. I knew that I needed help!

I finally ended up in the hospital and went into an inpatient program. After facing all of those emotions of first getting sober, I found some hope in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Now my life is amazing. I am 17 years old and couldn't be happier. I have regained the broken relationships with my family. I go to AA meetings on a regular basis and talk to my 12-step sponsor. Though I had a few slips after treatment, I have gotten right back on the path of my recovery. I can actually enjoy life being sober. I have a connection with a Higher Power. My life is saved, and I owe it all to the program of the 12 steps.

I have come to realize that my sobriety is a journey rather than a destination. In my journey of sobriety, I have found that I have needed much support. As a teenager with the disease of alcoholism and addiction, recovery high schools have enabled me to receive my education and maintain my sobriety. Though there are some things I feel I have missed out on by not attending my old high school, there is no way that I would have stayed sober if I had gone back.

I have attended (my recovery high school) for three years now. I continued to stay in a recovery high school because it has helped support my sobriety as well as enable me to receive an education. Some may ask how does a recovery high school support your recovery? Through my experience, I have found many ways that a recovery high school has supported my sobriety and recovery. The first and most important way that a recovery high school has supported me is the simple fact that you need to remain clean and sober to attend. That means that all the students are drug and alcohol free, therefore students don't have to go through the challenge of having drugs or alcohol in front of them in a school environment.

Also at my recovery high school, they require you to attend one 12-step meeting a week and have contact with a 12-step sponsor once a week. (A sponsor is someone who helps you to work the 12-step program.) They enforce this by having each student sign a contract agreeing to follow these requirements.

In the beginning I didn't understand meetings and sponsors; I thought that meetings were some kind of a cult, so the contract helped to force me to go and find out what they were really about—and meetings are not by any means any form of a cult!

Being at a recovery high school and having to attend these meetings and have contact with a 12-step sponsor has helped my sobriety a lot.



I now do not have to be told to attend meetings. I do so on a regular basis as well as contacting my 12-step sponsor. Having a sponsor and attending 12-step meetings is a very important thing in my journey of recovery. It is something that I will always need to do. The recovery high school's requirements, therefore, have helped me to learn a lot of things about my disease of alcoholism and addiction by requiring that I attend these meetings and have a sponsor. They helped to set me on my path to recovery.

Another way that attending a recovery high school has helped me is that when most kids get out of treatment, it is hard for them to get back in the habit of going to school, as some, such as myself, didn't attend while in treatment. Also, when I was using drugs and alcohol I did not do much—if any—of my homework, and I didn't attend school on a regular basis. At a recovery high school, the teachers and staff understand this and help you get back into that regular habit of going to school and doing homework. They help you re-learn how to become a successful student again.

The teachers at recovery high schools from my experience are very special people. They understand the disease of addiction and alcoholism and are willing to help students in any way possible. Whether it be educational, personal, or recovery needs, they have been there for me. Examples of the teachers being there for me are family issues, struggles in math class, and my relapse. The teachers all hold a special place in my heart.

Fortunately the class sizes in a recovery high school are smaller than a normal high school, so students are more likely to have their educational needs met. There is also a lot more one-on-one communication with the teachers in a recovery high school. Since the class sizes are much smaller, you are able to build a better relationship with students as well as staff.

This brings me to the next topic of meeting amazing sober peers. Getting a large sober network that you can receive from attending a recovery high school is extremely important to have when in recovery. When I got out of treatment, I thought to myself there was no one out there who is my age and trying to be sober. I thought that all teenagers were supposed to be experimenting with drugs and alcohol, so why would anyone want to be sober? Soon after applying to go to a recovery school—with the help of my parents—I was shocked; there were about 40 kids, and they were all trying to live a life of recovery. My experience with students at a recovery high school is that all the kids are really accepting. No matter your race, religion, age, sexual preference, or looks, they still accept you for who you truly are. I still to this day have some of my friends that I first met at (my

recovery high school) three years ago. Going to a recovery high school has helped me to form a sober network of friends.

Relapse is something that can happen in sobriety/recovery. I have relapsed a couple times, but my recovery high school students and staff were very supportive and helped me jump right back on my path to recovery.

Finally, one of the most amazing and helpful things that a recovery school has is called “group.” It consists of all the students for an hour once a day. Students get the chance to talk about how their recovery and sobriety is going. They can share things that may be a struggle in their everyday life as well. Then, after sharing, the student gets a chance to get feedback. Feedback is advice, strength, or experiences that other students have to offer and share. I find group extremely helpful, because I am able to talk about problems or struggles in my recovery, and there are students my age who can relate to me and offer me advice on similar situations they may have been in. Those are only a few of the ways a recovery high school has supported my recovery.

I would have never been able to attend my old high school and get the same support I do at a recovery high school. I feel that I would have faced many social and academic challenges if I had decided to return to my old high school. The most challenging thing about returning to my old high school would be seeing my old friends every day that I used to use drugs and alcohol with. It would be extremely hard for me to face my old friends and hear them talk about, “Oh! Remember that time we got high?” and about parties that are going on. I wouldn’t be able to stay away from the peer pressure.

I personally would not know where to begin finding sober friends at my old high school. It would be difficult to find a sober network at my old high school, because all the friends I know there use drugs and alcohol. And being able to find friends that understand my disease of alcoholism and addiction would definitely be a struggle. There is not much support for teenagers trying to stay sober at a regular mainstream high school. I know that there are chemical dependency counselors, but from my experience most of the kids that talk to them are forced by probation and don’t want to be sober.

If I were to relapse and use drugs or alcohol, who would call me out on it? And help me jump back on the path of recovery? I honestly do not think that I would be sober today if I went back to my old high school.

I would have faced academic struggles as well. Teachers at a mainstream high school do not necessarily understand that I basically need to relearn how to become a successful student. These are just some of the

challenges I would find most difficult if I were to return to my old high school.

There are, though, a few things I feel I have missed out on by not attending my old high school, such as the variety of electives, sports teams, physical education, and the guidance counselors. A mainstream high school offers electives, such as photography, ceramics, wood shop, small engines, foreign languages, etc. Most recovery high schools, from my experience, do not offer very many choices. I also feel that I miss out on sports teams and physical education. In my old high school they had a variety of sports you could try out for. My recovery school has none. Also in a mainstream high school, they have a variety of physical education classes. My recovery high school has had some in the past, but they cannot afford to hire physical education teachers and are not certified in physical education. I think that every growing teenager needs some sort of exercise regularly.

Also, we have no guidance counselors at my recovery high school. It was nice to have someone there to speak with about college and other things. We do have teachers that listen at my recovery school, but there is not always someone available as they have to teach classes. Unlike in a mainstream high school, there are counselors that are there for only your needs. Though I feel I have missed out on some opportunities by not returning to my old high school, my hope for the future is that they [my recovery school] will be able to offer those activities.

In the end, attending a recovery high school has helped to support my recovery in so many ways. I have only I mentioned a few. I am very grateful that I did not have to return to my old high school and face the challenges that I would be going through. Though I felt I missed out on some opportunities, I am so pleased that recovery schools exist, because they have helped me to become a successful student again, maintain my sobriety, and to begin my life-long journey of recovery. Recovery high schools have saved my life.

## ***COLLEGE STUDENTS***

***Andrew C.***

*Describe how recovery-based housing has supported your recovery. What challenges would you have faced attending a college without a recovery house?*

I was born 19 years ago as the second of five children, with an older sister and three younger brothers on Long Island in New York. My family has been very supportive, and we have always gotten along well. I went to local public schools through eighth grade, after which I went to a private, Catholic, all-male high school. I went into this high school knowing very few people and just feeling generally uncomfortable and lonely.

I knew my dad was sober but I knew very little about alcoholism. I only knew that, as the son of an alcoholic, I was more likely to be one myself, but this knowledge helped me very little. I had my first drink at a keg party during my third year in high school. I didn't drink very much, and I remember feeling just as uncomfortable that night as I usually did around groups of people. I also remember people smoking weed in the garage and thinking I would never do that. Later that year I drank on occasion, but not very frequently. Also later that year, I smoked pot for the first time. At this time I had started spending time in school with a few kids I shared a free period with. We would sit in the library and talk about music, but they often talked about hanging out with one another outside school and getting high. I began to like the sound of it more and more. This is why I smoked my first time, at a friend's house one night after a rock concert.

Around this time, one of my brothers, who is a year younger than I am, started drinking and smoking with his friends. During that year we smoked and drank together frequently. I also started spending a lot of time with the friends I had met in the library in school, and we would smoke whenever we saw each other and drink on occasion too. By the end of my junior year, I was smoking every day, usually by myself. I noticed some effects of this, but they didn't bother me much. I was lying to my parents about what I was doing, where I was going, and who I was spending time with. My grades started to suffer. I stopped spending time with other friends who I used to occasionally see but who didn't use. Using became a mental obsession; it was all I thought about.

This continued through my senior year of high school. As I got my driver's license and had some more freedom, I was using more and more. I could get weed and alcohol easier because I could drive to pick it up. I could stay over at people's houses and drink because I could drive myself home the next day. My grades continued to slip and at graduation I missed the four-year honor roll award by a tenth of a point, dropping about five percent from my first year. Due to my slowly declining grades, most of the colleges I applied to rejected me or placed me on waiting lists. One school called me up after the application deadline, even though I had not applied or even visited there. They encouraged me to apply anyway, so I did, and

I was accepted and offered a scholarship. I visited the school and liked it, so I decided to enroll there.

I partied through the summer before college, and my parents even encouraged me to get a fake ID in New York City before I went away to school. My sister was in college at the time and they knew she often went out to bars with her friends, so they thought I might want to do the same. I went off to college, 17 years old, with my fake ID and a big bag of marijuana. I didn't know anyone at the school, but I quickly found people interested in using like I was, and we were smoking in my dorm room during orientation. I took advantage of the new freedom college offered me. I rarely went to class, choosing instead to stay up all night and sleep all day. I partied with other people, but during the week I was often just smoking with my roommate or another friend or, many nights, by myself. Since I had a fake ID, I went on beer runs with fellow students, buying huge amounts of alcohol at a time and stashing it in our dorm rooms. We took my closet door off the hinges and used it as a beer pong table. I started to get in trouble with the RAs and with campus security. I got in trouble for drinking and other things. I also started to isolate. I was calling home very infrequently and lying about how things were going at school. I was going out less and less, choosing instead to stay in the dorm room alone or with a few other people. At the end of my first semester, I had a 1.3 GPA. My parents knew something was wrong, but I managed to convince them that drugs and alcohol were not the problem.

I returned to school after winter break. I knew using was causing problems and I was determined to improve that semester. I decided I would cut down on drinking and smoking and go to class. Within a week I was using just as much, and I was written up for my first drug violation. I was smoking pot in my room one afternoon, and someone called security. An officer banged on my door with his flashlight and confiscated my weed and some of my paraphernalia as well. A hearing was scheduled. I started ordering marijuana online at this point, having it sent to me through the mail from Canada. I didn't see the huge risk involved in this, and I was ordering pot in huge amounts. I was high all day, every day. I sealed up the cracks around my door with tape so that whenever I closed my door, I had an airtight seal. I was totally isolated whenever I wanted to be. Before my hearing came around for my drug violation, I was written up again and again. I set off the smoke alarm in my room late one night, and soon afterwards I was caught carrying alcohol across campus. Finally, I met with the judicial board, who decided that I would have to meet with a counselor on campus who specialized in drug and alcohol abuse. If I

didn't comply with her recommendations, I would be kicked out of school housing.

I met with the counselor and was dishonest in my conversation with her as well as my responses to a written evaluation I filled out. Nevertheless, she realized that I had a problem with alcohol and marijuana, and she pointed this out to me. She recommended that I go to a rehabilitation program, so I agreed, realizing there was no way I could get out of it. I signed a release so she could speak with my parents and figure out the best course of action. I called my parents that night and told them what I had to do, but I was still unwilling to take responsibility. I blamed the counselor and the school for my problems. I was told I would be withdrawing from school on a medical leave and that I would be going to a rehab somewhere. I had one more week to wait at school, so I continued to use for that week. I figured I would have to go to a rehab program somewhere and at the end of the summer, I could go back to school and party again. I did not want to be sober. The first day of spring break came, and my dad came out to pick me up. My last use was on March 11th, about an hour before my dad arrived to pick me up. We drove home for what was the most uncomfortable eight hours of my life. I sat at home for a few days and, due to my health insurance, I was to go to an outpatient program for the rest of the summer instead of a 28-day inpatient. My parents said the only reason I didn't go to an inpatient was the physical change they saw in me after just a few days sober.

I was finally totally honest at the intake for the outpatient program. I started there the next day. At that program I learned about the disease of alcoholism and the importance of AA. I still didn't want to be sober for the first few weeks there, but I was willing to stay sober for the program and check it out. They forced me to start attending AA meetings and get a sponsor or I would not move on to the next group, which met only twice a week with a different counselor. I started going to meetings, a couple a week, but I didn't talk to many people and I didn't really want to be there. As I kept going back, I saw how happy people were when they were sober, and I realized how much better I felt. I looked back on how unmanageable my life was when I used. I finally got a sponsor and started to call him every day. I met many people in meetings who I related with and started to really want to be sober. I was in contact with the counselor from my school, who told me that the school had a recovery house, one of only a few in the country, for students just like me. I decided I would go back to (my college) that fall and move into the recovery house. I finished the outpatient program at the end of the summer. My employers pointed out to me how much of a helpful worker I was that summer. They had not told

me what a great job I did in past years before I was sober. People were noticing a change in me.

I went back to school in August of 2006 and moved into the recovery house. There I met students in the same position as me. We started going to meetings together, a meeting just about every day. Recovery-based housing has been essential to my recovery. I probably would not have been able to return to college without such an opportunity. The support of the recovery house comes in many forms, and the challenges I would have faced if I attended a college without a residential recovery program would have been immense. The benefits of the recovery house include sober living, sober friends, recovery meetings, and helpful staff.

The first and most obvious benefit of the recovery house is a substance-free living and learning environment. University dormitories house some students who are using alcohol and other drugs, sometimes very frequently. Living in the recovery house affords me the opportunity to avoid being around alcohol and other drugs. Without this sober living and learning environment, returning to college in early sobriety would have been very difficult. Being in the presence of students using would be a constant temptation to relapse. Removing me from this dangerous environment has been one of the major benefits of the recovery house.

Along with this sober housing comes the support of other sober students in the recovery house. Attending college sober can be intimidating and lonely at times, and this would surely be so without the support of the other members of the recovery house. We have fun together doing things like taking trips to (a local) Amusement Park, spending time together after meetings, and going to parties together. More importantly, however, is the everyday support that comes with living with sober people. We talk to each other about how we are doing and we help each other with any problems we are having. We can also hold each other accountable, something which I have found very helpful in my recovery. Attending a college without a recovery house, I would have less contact with sober people and, therefore, less supportive help in staying sober.

Another example of the support of the recovery house is the help I receive through meetings each week. My treatment plan as a recovery house member includes attending a number of different meetings. There is a meeting each Monday in the recovery house with all the residents, the Resident Coordinator, and a counselor from University Counseling Services. I also attend a meeting Thursdays at University Counseling Services which is open to the whole campus, to anyone recovering from any dependency. The recovery house members share dinner in the House each Sunday, and

we take turns cooking Sunday dinner. In addition, I attend 12-step meetings with other members of the recovery house. We even hold two such meetings in the recovery house on Friday and Saturday, which are open to the recovering community of (the local city). All of these meetings are essential to my recovery. While 12-step meetings are central to my recovery program, the other meetings I attend as a member of the recovery house also help to keep me focused and allow me to share with other people as well as to listen to them. Without the recovery house, I would have fewer opportunities to do this each week.

Another helpful element of the recovery house is the involvement of staff members. This includes counselors from University Counseling Services and College Behavioral Health and the Resident Coordinator, as well as members of the Advisory Board. Counselors take an active role in my recovery, facilitating the Monday recovery house meeting and the Thursday University Counseling Services meeting. They are extremely helpful in these meetings as well as outside of them. The Resident Coordinator lives in the recovery house and is always around to talk to or to help with anything. Another way the counselors and Resident Coordinator have helped me is through advocacy. After my first semester in the recovery house, I was placed on academic separation due to my poor academic performance. I had done poorly before I was sober and didn't make enough improvement in early sobriety to reverse this. I appealed this decision and, with the help of those involved in the recovery house, I was welcomed back to school to continue my education. This form of support is another one of the many examples of how the recovery house has helped me.

Without the recovery house, returning to college as a sober student would have been very difficult. The challenges of living in the dormitories, not having sober friends on campus, having less access to recovery meetings, and being without the help of staff members would have proven difficult. The support of the recovery house and the residents and counselors was essential—I would not have been able to return to (my college). I got a sponsor in (the local city) and started working the 12 steps with him. I got involved in meetings and met lots of sober people in (the local area). My first semester back was an improvement, but I still fell short of how I hoped to do academically. Now, in my second semester sober, I am doing really well in school. I still get to a meeting almost every day. I am able to show up in class and be a productive student. I can help out other people—even just by driving them to a meeting. I have a great relationship with my family again. I have met tons of friends in sobriety. I am truly happy and content with myself. On March 12, 2007, I celebrated a year of sobriety. It has



been amazing looking back over the past year and seeing all the changes I have been through.

### **Dana O.**

*Describe how being a student in your school's program has impacted (positively or negatively) your relationships with students on campus who are not part of that program.*

Hello, my name is Dana. I am a 22-year-old college student (in a collegiate recovery community). I was born just north of the Twin Cities in White Bear Lake to a very loving family. There was always incessant pressure that I felt from my parents to be involved in activities, get straight As, be in shape, and work out regularly. At one point in my life I was involved in nearly every sport possible—soccer, basketball, softball, competitive gymnastics. You name it, I tried it. There was a point when I got sick of the constant whirlwind that had become my life; I just wanted to stop. I was never good at communicating with my teammates. In all of the years I was involved in sports and activities, I had never made any friends. They had stayed “teammates” for all those years.

There was a point when I started not to care what my parents thought anymore, and I started to do what I wanted to do. I wanted to drink and get high. I wanted to go to parties and kiss boys. I loved the attention! When I was drinking and partying, I felt like I finally had friends. I was always invited to parties, always made people laugh, and the guys I hung out with were starting to find me attractive. I felt like I was on top of the world. By this point, I had gotten into trouble with the school, being restricted from involvement with any activities that were school related, including sports. I was in heaven, but I cannot say that my parents approved; yet this behavior continued throughout middle school and high school. I experimented with a lot of different drugs, but found my favorite had become cocaine, which came to an end when I discovered meth; meth's high was much better, lasted longer, and the drug itself was much cheaper. This “wonder drug” that I had discovered brought me several possession charges, helped me total two cars, got me arrested, and sent me through court—which finally led me to a choice I had to make: Did I want this for my life?

After deciding this was not the path I wanted to take in my life, I pled out in court and agreed to go to treatment. I soon entered a 28-day treatment program at (an adolescent residential treatment center). Directly following, I was sent to an all-woman's extended care facility. After completing four

months of extended care, I returned to (the state where I had received treatment) to a halfway house, where I stayed an additional four months. This halfway house was more of a transitional period, where we were given more responsibilities, allowed to have a job and attend AA meetings on our own, with a few mandatory house meetings each week. After the four months at (my halfway house), I moved in with my parents for a month, until I could move into the (collegiate recovery community) at (my college).

In May 2004, I became a part of the (collegiate recovery community). I started taking classes that summer, worked a part-time job, and hung out with new friends I had found through the (collegiate recovery) program. Through (my collegiate recovery community), I learned to open up to and have substantial relationships with people, especially women. I learned to trust and to be honest and to share myself with others in the program. I never really knew who I was, and I was ashamed of whom I was; I learned that I was okay. (My collegiate recovery community) gives you access to licensed counselors, which we meet with weekly. It holds a Circle Meeting, which is a chance for everyone in the program to get together. Each week one individual tells his or her personal story, as a chance for us to get to know each member on a more personal level. We announce our anniversary/birthday dates to acknowledge personal victories, along with struggles within the group where extra support may need to be focused. There is also the CLASS office on campus, which helps us with our academics, by setting aside specific time increments each week to work on our studies. The CLASS office has tutors available for any additional help you may need. All of these aspects within the program concentrate on dealing with the mental and emotional stability and the academics of each individual student.

The only difference between a student in the (collegiate recovery) program and any other student at the college is that as a (collegiate recovery community) student, I live with people who are also in recovery. No student in any one of my classes would ever know I was in the program unless I told them. I still make friends, study, get coffee, and converse with students in my classes, experiencing the same college experiences as any other students. I just have additional resources/outlets on campus that are recovery-based and focus more on my mental/emotional needs.

I am in my fourth year at (my college); I will be graduating this winter, in December. I have been a part of (my collegiate recovery community) for the entirety of my time at the college. It has been such a great experience, and I have made such great friends that I just do not want to leave.

**Ryan U.**

*As an alumnus of a university with a collegiate recovery community, how do you feel your experience at your college prepared you to live a clean and sober lifestyle after college?*

My story is similar to many people's and begins in high school. My freshman year of high school I played soccer and refused to even smoke cigars with my friends. That quickly changed however by the time my sophomore year came around. At that point, I started drinking after school alone and with friends. I felt like the void of insecurity began to be filled and like I was fitting in. However, it didn't take long before I stumbled into my parent's friend's house in a blackout, and in another incident I was arrested for underage possession of alcohol. Eventually, it seemed easier to get and use marijuana, so I switched to using that particular substance during my junior year.

The toll my actions were taking on my family was felt immediately. There was constant arguing between myself and my mother and step-father. The cycle continued through my senior year, only growing in intensity and severity. Fortunately I did well enough to graduate and attend college; however my parents gave me an ultimatum: if I messed up in college, I would return home and go to rehab.

I'm grateful now, as that's exactly what happened. From the moment my parents dropped me off at college, I used. Eventually, I was kicked out of the dorms for possession and consumption of marijuana. I thought my life was completely ruined and that everything I worked hard for was destroyed. I attended an outpatient program, graduated, went to 12-step meetings, and after a period of several relapses finally now have six years of continuous recovery. With recovery I was able to get an Associate's degree from (a local college) and a B.A. from (a four-year college), study overseas, and just recently I have been accepted to a graduate school program at Johns Hopkins University in China. Besides being able to successfully go back to school, my relationship with my family is excellent, and most importantly I feel good about the person I am becoming.

While working on my B.A. degree, I lived in the recovery housing that's offered by (my college). The recovery house is administered and run through a division of the health services of (the university). The director of the program works in cooperation with Resident Life to oversee the housing. The program is a college dorm open only to students of the university with recovery-related issues. The program staff oversees

admittance to the program, which can house 20-plus male and female residents.

The recovery house is run largely by the student residents. There are monthly “house” meetings where the staff and students meet to discuss house-related issues. A senior member of the house is also chosen to be the Resident Assistant, who works directly with the program’s administration as well as Resident Life on campus.

Living in the recovery house did wonders for my recovery. First of all, as soon as I moved in, I immediately had a whole group of peers who I could identify with, hang out with, and have fun in recovery with. Having a network of people my own age in recovery, especially in a college environment, made it much easier for me to adapt to the college scene and do well in school. Many of the people became and still are my best friends, including my girlfriend who has been with me for the past four years. Also, I had the distinction of serving as the Resident Assistant for the recovery house for one semester.

Living in the recovery house also afforded me the opportunity to live on my own, take care of myself and have people who supported me in that process. That experience proves more valuable everyday as I continue to live a clean and sober life beyond my college experience.

While I was working on my B.A., I was really fortunate to be able to study abroad with a friend I met in the recovery housing. I started studying Chinese after the first semester I went to [this university] and was able to receive two scholarships to study in Taiwan the summer after my junior year. Once I graduated, my recovery house friend and I lived in Taiwan for a year, where I studied and taught English. We were able to stay clean and take a little piece of the recovery house with us to the other side of the world.

In all, my college experience would have been radically different if it weren’t for the recovery house and the network of people I met there. It’s something I’m extremely grateful for and has helped me live clean and sober, both in college and for the rest of my life.

### ***Austin M.***

*What made you select a college with a collegiate recovery community instead of a college without one? Did you think going to a college without a collegiate recovery community was an option?*

I was born November 7, 1982, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. My parents, Greg and Debbie, have been married for over 30 years now. I have one

younger brother Ben. I was born into an upper-middle-class, Lutheran, Caucasian family. We lived in the suburbs of Oklahoma City my whole life. Family life was great. Both of my parents were very hard working and very passionate about their children. They both gave Ben and me the love that we needed as children. My childhood was great until about middle school.

When I started sixth grade, I was treated differently than most of the other kids. I wore glasses and was pretty smart. This made me an outcast of sorts, and eventually I began to socially isolate and slip into a state of depression. Depression is the word that would best characterize my mood for the next six years. I hated life, hated school, just plain hated. High school felt like a new start for me. I started by joining the debate team, which led me to both some of the worst and best outcomes of my early adolescence. I began to emulate the older debate students who drank and smoked cigarettes. I immediately became addicted to cigarettes and then started drinking. I remember vividly the first time I got drunk. I felt as if I would never have another negative emotion and would always be loved by everyone. The night promptly ended when I threw up in front of the whole party, right next to the keg.

My addiction was born on that night. I learned quickly that chemicals can fix the way I feel. If I feel depressed, I can smoke some pot. If I need to be able to interact socially, alcohol will bail me out. This cycle continued until it became one of the centralizing themes of who I was. I eventually got into harder drugs; cocaine, specifically, quickly brought me to my knees. I went from being an "A" student with much potential to a juvenile delinquent, constantly in trouble with my parents, the school, and eventually the police. My parents finally discovered my cocaine usage one summer night, and I was sent to a juvenile rehabilitation center promptly afterward.

In treatment, I learned a new way to live and a new reason for living. I discovered that masking negative emotions with chemicals just makes it that much worse. Processing emotion, I would say, was the greatest lesson I received from the treatment center. I left treatment after six months and headed to Dallas to try living on my own for a while before I went to school. I flourished there, learning much about being an adult and life in general.

The decision to go to school was one I intended to make but led me to a host of fears. The primary fear was that I would begin drinking again because I would have to enter into the world of my peers again. I feared that if I didn't somewhat assimilate back into my peer group, I

would feel isolated and alone again. It was somewhat of a double bind in that I felt I was damned if I went to school and damned if I didn't. Additionally, I was damned if I joined my peer group and again damned if I didn't.

I learned about [my collegiate recovery community] when I first arrived in [a nearby city]. News of the program had spread by word of mouth. I knew once I heard of the [collegiate recovery community] I was going to go to school at [that college]; there were simply no other options in my mind. I knew that if I could get hooked into a group of my peers in recovery, I would have a chance to make it. I know myself very well, and because of that wasn't willing to trust myself in another environment. This was especially pertinent, since that I was so fragile in my recovery at the time. I was by my own account still quite immature and in the process of adolescent development—identity-wise—during this transition period. I believed that the collegiate recovery community would enable me to have a safe recovery environment to use as a springboard back into the world of my peers.

Now life is great. I am currently working on my Master's degree in Marriage and Family Therapy, and I hope to pursue a PhD when I'm finished with that. I've been clean and sober for over six and a half years now. I have transitioned well and feel that I am a very well-adjusted and socially secure person.

## NOTE

1. This is in reference to the 2007 Joint Meeting on Adolescent Treatment Effectiveness (JMATE), at which all eight of the students represented here presented their stories and question responses as part of a panel.

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