

## The story of an eleven-year journey

*More than two years have passed since the 11-year-old chapter of our lives came into focus. I spent half my adult life in self-deception, passivity and dependency. With the end of this tumultuous chapter has come an awareness and empathy for those who are in seemingly impossible situations. It is my hope these words will strike a chord and help others realize they're not alone and that there can be a positive end to what is a destructive cycle.*

*You may feel you have heard this story a hundred times before. My purpose for writing this is two-fold: one, it feels right to tell the story now and two, even though it may be a familiar story, the ending is unlike many others. The cycle of drug abuse and violence stopped. Our family grew from the experience and we have moved beyond the anger and pain.*

My daughter was a liar. I've tried to pinpoint when it all began—but that's impossible. More importantly, why did it happen?

Penny was always considered to be an extremely bright child. Her Head Start teachers suspected she was a genius. She was a leader among her three- and four-year-old friends. She was independent, got along well with others and she easily accepted responsibilities at home, even at her young age.

We were careful to teach her the difference between right and wrong. We sent her to Sunday school. We taught her that she would get into more trouble if she lied to us than if she told us the truth, no matter what.

She was, and continues to be, bull-headed. As parents, her father and I spent a lot of time compromising with her and pointedly explaining why she should or shouldn't do certain things. We gradually realized she felt things could go only one way—hers.

Her intelligence and stubbornness have, unfortunately, worked hand-in-hand in a very negative way. She convincingly lied her way through scrapes with the law, me, her dad, other family members, teachers, bosses—any person or entity she perceived to be authoritative or threatening.

***Penny's stubbornness and intelligence have worked hand-in-hand in a very negative way. She successfully lied her way through numerous encounters with the law, family and school officials.***

School came easy for Penny. She learned the basics with no problem. In the early grades, her report cards boasted A's and B's. Things declined some when her dad and I divorced. She began exhibiting the highly emotional signs of puberty when she was nine. A wonderful sixth-grade teacher gently helped guide Penny through difficult post-divorce, pre-pubescent times.

I never denied that my children would be at risk for drug abuse. However, I was hopeful that by my living a decent life they would live and learn by example. It was not to be. At 11-years-of-age, Penny and a girlfriend practiced snorting artificial sweetener to see how snorting coke would feel. This experimentation was merely a bridge to the serious drugs readily available in our community. Penny concealed and "muled" drugs for local dealers who knew she would not get into serious trouble if caught.

When Penny entered junior high school, I felt confident that she would excel, that the worst was behind us, that she was growing up. Foolishly, I thought, "I'm your friend, not your enemy," "We're in this together," ideology would work. Wrong. Penny was dealt detention the first day of seventh grade after getting into a fight with another girl. The trouble was just becoming apparent.

Penny brought home few friends. This is not to say she didn't have acquaintances. These acquaintances were never introduced to me, for good reason. As far as I knew, Penny and her girl friends spent Friday and Saturday nights doing the make-up and hair thing. These were normal, innocent enough activities for the pre-teen set. I was always relieved when I heard the giggles and laughter roll toward me from down the hall. At least I knew where they were, I'd tell myself. Isn't it nice they care so much about their appearance, I'd fool myself. However, now that I'm older and wiser, I realize the girls were merely practicing for the "real" thing. With their big hair and garish make-up, the girls would somehow, unbeknownst to me, attract the more unsavory characters of this small town. The older, often drug-laden young men of this community preyed on, and continue to do so, the girls with low self-esteem.

Penny became sexually active when she was 12. I suspected it, but it wasn't until she was a little older

that I confronted her. I denied that "my little girl" liked sex; that, at her young age, she could be a sexual individual. I prompted her to get on birth control. I didn't necessarily condone teen sex, but reality is reality—I didn't want her to become part of the ugly teen pregnancy statistics. But at 16, Penny became pregnant and had her first child less than two weeks after her 17th birthday.

Being a teen mom was hard. Being a 40-year-old grandmother was just as hard. Penny wasn't my only child in the house. I had another teen-aged daughter to consider when the baby came. It was a difficult

***Being a teen mom was difficult for Penny. Being a 40-year-old grandmother was just as hard. I had a difficult time letting Penny be a mom.***

adjustment equaled by no other challenge before or since then. I had a strong circle of friends, and a caring family, who helped me through these tough years. Penny's father, removed from the area, was as supportive as he could be, but his life didn't really allow for a troubled teen with a baby.

The baby was colicky and fussy which caused us all to be tense which caused the baby to be even more colicky and fussy. The mid-night feedings, child care needs and extra expenses were nearly all, as a single mother, I could handle. I put my life on hold to help my daughter and her baby. I barely functioned at work. My boss and co-workers were patient, but the guilt I felt for not doing my job well was crippling.

It was almost impossible for me to let my daughter be a mom. After I would see her doing things or hear her saying things that I didn't agree with, I would butt in and the fight would be on. Unfortunately, I was Penny's sole support system outside of school. Her friends thought it was "neat" that she had a baby. Most wanted babies of their own. At times, I think these young girls have babies to get attention. Penny told me she just wanted something of her own to love.

Once the baby got older, Penny started venturing out more, leaving the baby with me. I can't remember the number of times I had to fetch her from this apartment, that hotel room, that "friends" house. I didn't like what she was up to, but I feared that if I made life too difficult for her at home, she would take the baby I loved so much and run. So, I made it easy for her. I rolled over and became the passive parent. I allowed her to bring her men friends into my home. I rationalized it. At least I knew where she was, I knew she was safe (if you can call it that) and, while she was home, she had responsibility for the baby. One of her men friends got busted, at my house, for possession. I couldn't believe that I could be so gullible and that Penny would allow the man to endanger her baby and the rest of her family.

When Penny got serious about another man, I was relieved. She was still living at home, working some but contributing very little to the household. Her new man seemed level-headed, a hard worker and very industrious. He had a steady job and was always willing to help Penny with the baby. However, it didn't relieve the stress at home. I got tired of always coming home to a mess, the constant chaos, the demands. I was about to give them the boot, when Penny and her new man up and moved out to their own apartment. I was relieved. At least I didn't have to be the bad guy.

Come to find out, Penny was pregnant with her second child, at 20 years of age. About a year after the second child's birth, Penny and her man were married. But, one night, just a few months after their marriage, Penny threatened to shoot her husband with his pistol. The "love birds separated." Penny's husband took most of their belongings, leaving Penny and the kids living in an almost empty, much-too-expensive rental. He moved into a small house and she was later forced to move into another less-expensive apartment with the kids. At the time, I felt I needed to help Penny. I paid off her car and I helped her with the rent. I was throwing good money after bad.

Drugs continued to play a very destructive role in all our lives. It became obvious to me that something was wrong with Penny. Maybe she was sick, I'd tell myself. Penny dropped a lot of weight, had gray circles under her eyes all the time, would exhibit violent fits of anger for no reason. I denied she was using. She was always

moody, I'd say. (Of course she was. She'd been using since she was 11 years old. I knew only a drug-induced personality and could not tell the difference.)

The changes were difficult for Penny's oldest child to handle. This beautiful grandchild, so bright, so fun, so lovable started acting out, became unruly and was unbearable. It amazed me that a firm hug and gentle voice could reverse the behavior so easily. I had to provide a calm and safe environment for this child. So, in the fall, my grandchild moved into my home with us. I did not do this to make Penny's life easier. I did it for the mental well-being and safety of my grandchild.

Penny maintained custody of her youngest. It was a way for her to conceal the drugs and money she was holding for her dealer. Numerous suicide attempts brought the law into the picture. Custody of the children was officially given to her husband and to me. Penny continued to keep in touch, but I rarely saw her. I wasn't sure where she was living or even if she had a roof over her head. Hour-long telephone conversations convinced me Penny was in a self-destruct mode. I did not know where to go for help.

She was on a down hill slope and sliding fast. If it had not been for a not-so-popular 'undercover' cop, Penny, I firmly believe, would be dead now. She knew she was

under suspicion. The paranoia that accompanies drug use went into full swing. Everyone was "after her". The only people she trusted were part of the seedy drug community. Everyone was suspicious of Penny. So-and-so was taking pictures of me, she'd say. They're following me around, she'd tell me. Penny's demise came late one night when her husband caught her smoking crank in an abandoned house. She got busted.

Penny was in jail. No matter how hard it was to leave her, no matter how many heart-wrenching collect calls I got from her, I knew jail was the safest place for her. She had hit bottom. She had lost her kids, her home, her marriage, her job, everything that should have been important to her. How she maintained the appearance of any sort of normalcy and productivity while using is beyond me. I guess that's where her intelligence came into play.

***My grandchild started exhibiting extreme signs of stress. He started acting out and became unruly. A firm hug and calm voice often calmed him. I needed to provide him a safe and stable environment in which to live.***

Penny, instead of doing

major jail time, chose

treatment. She completed the

program in less than 60 days

and returned home an

entirely new person. It was

like having a stranger in my

house. She was calm, sane,

nice and fun to be around.

We became friends again.

Penny's treatment was successful. She remains clean to this day. Her life has not been without hardships. She had to earn her husband's trust all over. She had to earn my trust, her children's trust. It was difficult for her to get a job again. But Penny maintained and beat the odds and has not returned to her former life. She has proven herself over and over again. Where Penny's intelligence and stubbornness worked against her in her youth, they have worked just as positively for her as she has grown older.

There are times when Penny exhibits some of the traits of a practicing addict. Her anger often gets in the way of her personal growth and maturity. She continues to have a hard time with authority.

In writing this piece, I relieve myself of some of the guilt I have amassed over the past decade or so. I know now, with affirmation from my friends, family, and Penny herself, that I did the best I could considering the circumstances. Parents, don't fool yourselves into thinking this will never happen to you. No family is immune. I have seen the ugly side of my small, quiet town. I have seen the goings on and the "good" kids get sucked into the seediest of lifestyles. I can only hope we don't have to go through it with the next generation.

Our family has done more than move beyond the past. We have begun the struggle of recovery and self-discovery. We have begun the arduous trip down a road of pitfalls, barriers and breakthroughs. To all on the same trip I say, it's a journey worth the effort.