

people

# JENNY'S STORY

BY MORTON DEAN

A YOUNG WOMAN'S EXPERIENCE  
WITH ADDICTION AND  
RECOVERY SHEDS LIGHT  
ON THE USE AND AVAILABILITY  
OF DRUGS AMONG TEENS



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## Jenny Carpenter has a story to tell.

It's not the kind of story that will go down well in our quiet little town. She wants her story out, she says, to help Ridgefield kids understand that being stoned is not the cool, fun, kicks-only experience their drug-using friends make it out to be. "I lost four years of life," she says. "Four years. I missed a lot of growing up because I was too high." And she wants Ridgefield parents to listen up, too, wants them to understand, that too often there's nothing they can do to keep their kids away from drugs but they have to keep trying, keep reaching out, and not give up the search for a way to break through, to connect with their kids. Jenny has some advice. Not Pollyannaish advice but practical, real-life advice.

Jenny's an expert.

She was a student at Ridgefield High School. Sometimes purchased drugs at the high school. Often showed up in class wasted. She would have graduated in 2001 but dropped out in her senior year. "I didn't care," she says. "I was too stoned to care about anything." Anything other than getting high and staying high.

Jenny's not proud of what she's done, but she's proud of what she's doing now. She's 22 years old. Lives in town. Has a job. Got her GED, high-school equivalency diploma. And is struggling to stay clean. It's always a struggle, she says.

Jenny sat down with Ridgefield Magazine and revealed some aspects of those troubled years that even her family and close friends will find surprising.

### ARE YOU CLEAN AND SOBER?

Yes. It's been about a year.

### ARE YOU IN A PROGRAM?

No, but I have one-on-one therapy sessions. My support group is my family and friends.

### HOW DIFFICULT HAS YOUR REHAB BEEN?

It's been pretty hard—there are times at parties when I'm tempted—but for the most part I've done a lot of growing up. But it's not as hard as I thought it would be. I've been through a lot and have done a lot of bad things. So now it's time to turn myself around and do something with my life.

### WHAT KEEPS YOU GOING?

The memory of my grandmother. She passed away not too long ago, when I was going through the worst. I definitely felt as

though I let her down and didn't get to show her how far I've come.

### WHAT DRUGS DID YOU USE?

Anything. Anything I could get my hands

*"Ecstasy made you feel that everything was fine, everything was happy. You loved everybody. But it messes with your head, for days afterward you are so much more depressed, down."*

on. Definitely coke and pot and ecstasy. I never really did acid or those types of drugs.

### TELL ME ABOUT THE FIRST TIME YOU USED DRUGS.

I was at my girlfriend's house, and we stole some pot from her mom. We wanted to try it because everyone was talking about it. I don't think I really got high the first time.

### HER MOM HAD POT?

Yes, her mom had pot.

### HOW OLD WERE YOU?

14.

### TELL ME ABOUT THE FIRST TIME YOU USED HARDER DRUGS.

It was probably when I was about 17. I started using ecstasy. It made you feel so incredible. It made you feel that everything was fine, everything was happy. You loved everybody. But it messes with your head, for days afterward you are so much more depressed, so down.

### WHERE DID YOU GET THE ECSTASY?

We bought it from a kid in school.

### RIDGEFIELD HIGH SCHOOL?

Yes.

### DID YOU ALWAYS BUY FROM OTHER KIDS IN THE HIGH SCHOOL?

No, not always. I started meeting up with



older people who would get it for us, but who didn't necessarily go to Ridgefield High.

### WHERE DID THE DRUGS COME FROM?

Pretty much all of the drugs that come to this town come from Danbury or from further away. Or people bring it from Vermont or Maine.

**DID YOU EVER HAVE DIFFICULTY FINDING DRUGS?**

The hard drugs are harder to find, but within in the last couple of years, a lot of heroin has been around. That's one thing I would never touch, because I've had friends who have died from it.

**DID YOU ARRANGE MEETINGS OR JUST HANG OUT WHERE YOU KNEW YOU COULD FIND DRUGS?**

You just call whoever it is. You just pick up the phone and usually within a half hour you had whatever you wanted.

**DELIVERED?**

No, you went and picked it up wherever they said to pick it up.

**IN TOWN?**

Parking lots, you know, secluded roads.

**WOULD YOU SAY THAT WHEN YOU WERE IN HIGH SCHOOL, EVERYBODY KNEW VARIOUS DRUGS WERE AVAILABLE AT VIRTUALLY A MOMENT'S NOTICE?**

Yes, it's pretty well-known. You could be any type of kid—a jock, a gothic and wear all black—not one specific group do drugs. You could be anybody. I feel there is a lot going on that isn't really talked about.

**MEANING WHAT?**

Just because you have a huge mansion, your parents have expensive things, and you get a BMW for your 17th birthday doesn't mean that your life behind closed doors is as good as it looks. A lot of kids have a lot of issues, and they turn to drugs.

**HOW DID YOU PAY FOR THE DRUGS?**

Just cash. I never pawned anything of my own, but I did go into my mother's purse or brother's. I didn't care.

**WERE YOU EVER ARRESTED?**

Just once.

**HOW DID THAT HAPPEN?**

Back when I was doing a lot of coke—my grandmother was dying, my mom moved out of this house to go be with her—I was having non-stop parties in the house. Me and three other people came up with a plan. My mom was up my butt for me to get a job, and I didn't know how I was going to get money to give to her. So we figured out how to steal stuff from this person's house we knew would be away for the weekend. I was

the getaway driver. We broke into this house and stole the people's things and went to the city and sold them, pawned them off.

**WERE YOU FRIGHTENED OR WERE YOU SO HIGH YOU DIDN'T GET IT?**

I was pretty high. I was nothing like I am



**SHE IS NOT ALONE**

“Jenny tells a story that I hear commonly at the Youth Service Bureau, from kids at the Teen Barn and from the individuals who are on the Ridgefield Youth Commission. I hope telling her story will make those kids more visible to this community that has so much to offer so that they too can get their needs met.”

*-Lisa Kuller, clinical social worker, Ridgefield Youth Service Bureau*

right now. I'm a completely different person than I was a year ago. I didn't care about anything. I thought I was untouchable. About two days later, the cops came to my house at five in the morning to search my room. My grandmother had come to stay with my mom. She was asleep on the couch. When they came in they shined a flashlight in her eyes and she got

all scared and she ended up having heart palpitations and had to be rushed to the hospital. When my mom was with my grandmother at the hospital the cops were searching my room. I was devastated.

**WHAT DID THEY FIND?**

They found the stuff that we couldn't sell, that we couldn't pawn in the city. They found a bag of jewelry. There were laptops in my trunk.

**DO YOU THINK IT WAS A GOOD THING THAT YOU GOT CAUGHT?**

Yeah, if I didn't get caught I would continue to do bad things and wouldn't have straightened myself up at all. It was the worst time of my entire life. My grandmother was in the hospital, and they said that she only had a week to live and I couldn't be with her because I had to be at the police station.

**DID YOU DO ANY TIME?**

No. I went to court 12 times from December to this past August. It was very stressful. I had to keep taking off from work. It was the first job that I'd kept. It was really good. It was day care, and I got attached to the kids. Then all of a sudden it turned out that I had to give them a week's notice. My last court date was going to be August 29 and I thought that I was going to jail for two years. I was so sick. I was throwing up. Then it turns out that the father of one of the kids that I babysat was a judge, and he spoke to the court on my behalf. I think that is what saved me. I got five years probation and am required to wear an electronic monitoring bracelet for six months.

**SOMEONE WHO IS ACTIVE IN THE FIGHT AGAINST DRUGS TOLD ME THAT A RIDGEFIELD HIGH SCHOOL KID COULD FIND HEROIN WITHIN TEN MINUTES OF THE HIGH SCHOOL. DO YOU BELIEVE IT?**

It wouldn't surprise me.

**TO BUY DRUGS IN SOME BIG CITIES, THERE ARE STREET CORNERS YOU CAN GO TO. IS THAT TRUE IN RIDGEFIELD?**

No, absolutely not. It doesn't work that way. You call someone and go wherever. It's not like, well, let's go to Starbuck's to get some.

**WHAT AGE GROUPS ARE THE LIKELY USERS?**

It could be anybody. I know of people in the middle school who experiment.

**IS THERE ANYTHING ANYONE COULD HAVE DONE TO PREVENT YOU FROM WALKING DOWN THAT ROAD?**

No. You're always going to follow your friends in some way. "Well, she's doing, so let me just try it."

**THERE'S NOTHING ANYONE COULD HAVE SAID TO YOU?**

No. I heard stories. We had DARE and we had all these programs. When you're young, you're very impressionable and tend to believe what older people say. But when you feel like you're in control of yourself, that's when it doesn't matter what anyone says. When you're that age you think you can do whatever you want.

**IS THERE ANY PRESENTATION THAT YOU—AS SOMEONE WITH EXPERIENCE—COULD GIVE TO KIDS THAT WOULD SCARE THEM STRAIGHT?**

Well, I have a 13-year-old cousin. I understand how she feels. I understand what they go through. At the high school they had a program where mothers of children who died in drunk-driving accidents came and we saw pictures of the crash and a film. Everyone's faces were like, *Oh my God*. That doesn't mean they didn't go out and drink that weekend. Parents need to be more supportive. Forget about yelling and saying, "If we catch you with stuff, blah, blah, blah." If you look at your kids as people and not as little kids that you can push around, then maybe kids will start listening more.

**PEOPLE, FRIENDS, TEACHERS PROBABLY SUSPECTED YOU WERE USING. DID THEY TRY TO STOP YOU?**

I definitely showed up in class, you know, stoned. Definitely. I don't think the teachers thought anything. As far as family, this interview is going to be the first time that anyone will know about my coke problem. It was the worst time of my life. As far as pot, I've been caught by my mom. She didn't scream, but she said, "Come on. You got to straighten yourself up." It made me feel worse that she was disappointed than if she was mad.

**A DRUG COUNSELOR ONCE TOLD ME THAT PARENTS ARE THE FIRST TO SUSPECT IT AND THE LAST TO KNOW IT. THEY DON'T WANT TO CONFIRM THEIR KID'S PROBLEM.**

Definitely. I think a lot of kids would stay

out longer at night, I did, so I could go home with a straight face. A lot of parents, I'm sure, would assume—they find a bowl or pipe when doing their laundry—that the kid is doing something. Sometimes parents suspect it, but don't raise the right question.

**DO YOU BELIEVE THAT PARENTS HAVE AN ABSOLUTE RIGHT TO SEARCH THEIR KIDS' ROOMS?**

If they don't respect you, then you will feel that you don't need to respect them.

*"The cops came to my house at five in the morning to search my room. They found the stuff that we couldn't pawn—a bag of jewelry and some laptops in my trunk. I was devastated."*

If there's enough evidence that something's going on—they're failing in school or staying out all hours of the night—maybe you can check things out. That might be a cry for help. But if it's just being nosy, then no.

**WHERE DID YOU HIDE YOUR DRUGS?**

Anywhere. Underneath the couch, between my bed. I didn't really hide it too well. Usually I just hid it in my sock drawer.

I was pretty stupid about driving around with stuff in my car.

**WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO A KID WHO IS TEMPTED BY FRIENDS, WHO ARE SAYING, "DON'T BE CHICKEN, DON'T BE A WIMP—IT'S FUN"?**

If you're hanging around people like that—who are trying to get you to do things you don't want to do—then you just have to walk away. They're not your true friends.

**HOW SHOULD A TEENAGER HANDLE IT IF A FRIEND IS USING DRUGS?**

Friends of mine have died. My best friend's boyfriend just last year passed away of a heroin overdose, in town. It was devastating for everybody. You have to stop and think what the consequences are. If my friends were doing something like that, I would definitely say: "It's your life. You can do what you want. But I'm just letting you know that

I feel uncomfortable and I am worried about you.” But if you keep harassing them it could make it worse, because then they just break away from you and not trust you.

#### WHAT SUGGESTIONS DO YOU HAVE FOR PARENTS WHOSE KIDS MIGHT HAVE A DRUG PROBLEM?

You have to talk to them. You have to sit down and have a conversation when they get home from school or during dinner. Don't start accusing, because they will put their defense up right away. Talk to them like human beings and not like you're supposed to be controlling their life. I think every kid in town has an opportunity to talk to their parents on the same level and say, “Yeah, I have things going on, so instead of you punishing me, why don't you try to help me?”

#### I'VE HEARD THAT PEOPLE WHO ARE USING ARE THE BEST CON ARTISTS—THAT CONNING PEOPLE CLOSE TO YOU IS AN ART FORM. IS THAT TRUE?

Oh, definitely, 100 percent. It's something that comes with the territory. There were times when I would walk around the house obliterated. I didn't care. But most people

*“You have to sit down and have a conversation with your kids when they get home from school or during dinner. Don't start accusing, because they will put their defense up right away.”*

are going to not want anyone to know except for best friends. You just put on a straight face. That's just what you do. You say, “What are you talking about? That's not true.” It's an interesting conversation—“I have allergies,” “I have a scratch in my eye.”

#### WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO CLEAN UP YOUR ACT?

It was when I realized that I disappointed my family. The whole period of a year—going to court, getting a GED—made me feel like, “You gotta do something with yourself. You didn't go to college like all the other kids. Look at where they are.” I just realized I should start growing up.

#### DO YOU REMEMBER ANY SPECIFIC MOMENT THAT IT REALLY DAWNED ON YOU TO GO STRAIGHT, OR WAS IT AN ACCUMULATION OF THINGS?

It was the day of my grandmother's funer-

al. When my grandmother passed away, I never got to apologize to her. I never got to tell her that I'm not going to be this person. On the day of her funeral, when I was driving in the limousine, I said to myself: *I don't want to disappoint anyone again.* That's pretty much the day I decided that I needed to straighten myself out.

#### DO YOU HAVE A GOAL IN LIFE OTHER THAN STAYING SOBER?

To be a really good person, just like my mom. She has struggled, but she's an amazing person with a good heart. That's what I want to be. I don't want to be someone who deals or does drugs. I don't need to be rich or have expensive things. I want to have a normal life. I want to be happy with myself. **RM**

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