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YOUNG PEOPLE IN RECOVERY:

Building a Movement

By Colette Kimball, M.P.H.

While historically there have been few resources specifically tailored to the unique needs of youth in recovery...this is starting to change. Adults, families, youth, schools, community programs, and researchers are beginning to work together to create the support systems necessary to help youth sustain their recovery.

Last year, about a quarter of all high school seniors (25.2%) reported using an illicit drug at least once during the past thirty days, with 6.6% of seniors reporting daily marijuana use, and 2.1% reporting daily alcohol use (Johnston et al., 2012). Given the number of youth who use substances, it shouldn't be surprising that 5–8% of youth in the U.S. develop a substance use disorder (Sussman, 2011). With the vast amount of research available on adolescent drug and alcohol use in general—for example, the Monitoring the Future Study is in its thirty-seventh year—it is surprising how little research and information is available on youth in recovery.

While conducting an extensive review of the research literature on teen substance abuse and recovery, I found little research-based information about the needs of youth in recovery and supports available to them. Fortunately, I was introduced to Greg Williams, co-founder of the organization Connecticut Turning to Youth and Families. From Greg, I learned about the newly formed group “YPR | Young People in Recovery”™. This grassroots national movement is composed of young people (roughly 17–28 years of age) who are in long-term recovery and are advocating to spread awareness, increase services, and facilitate partnerships that support young people in finding and sustaining recovery. Their goal is to increase awareness about the needs of youth in recovery amongst service providers so that social systems can improve their

services for this population, and ultimately spur research in this neglected area. I have learned a lot about youth in recovery from my discussions with Greg. In the e-interview below, Greg and two other YPR members, Lacie Vanover from Tennessee and Mike Fildes from Nevada, answer some questions about the needs of youth in recovery and the goals of the Young People in Recovery movement.

Colette: *Greg, Lacie, and Mike, thank you for agreeing to share your experiences with us as we explore the needs of youth in recovery. First, let's begin by defining the term “recovery.” What does YPR mean by “recovery” and does this differ from how young people or social service systems use the term?*

Greg: I should start off by saying that one of YPR's guiding values is that we believe recovery is self-defined, therefore our responses will reflect our personal ideas and definitions of what recovery means to us. For me, at 17 years of age, I didn't want to be in “recovery.” I had all of these perceptions in my mind of who and what a person with an alcohol and other drug problem looked like and none of those delusional images looked anything like me. It took me a long time after putting down drugs and alcohol to figure out what “recovery” actually meant to me, and it is somewhat indefinable—it's more of a feeling to me. I can tell you

that my life in recovery comes down to essentially the complete reversal of everything I once believed before:

- I do everything today I used to sit around drunk or high saying I was going to do (i.e., bungee jumping, traveling, go to college, get a job, change the world, etc.)
- I have something to offer today because of my lived experience—I am not purposeless
- I believe today that strong people ask for help—they are not weak
- The bonds between friends and family are worth more than money
- Patience, tolerance, and love have the power to heal others suffering from this health condition

Lacie: To me, recovery is as different as each person's life and stories. How I got into recovery may be different from anyone else. Recovery is not just how a young person reaches sobriety, but how one is actively pursuing his or her own life. It doesn't matter how recovery is reached, just that it is reached!

Mike: As a young person in long-term recovery, I have seen countless definitions of recovery out there, I agree with a lot of the values and points made. But in all honesty, I think the definition of recovery to me is more of a living document filled with ongoing experiences, knowledge gained, and personal growth. It's not measured by the scale of everyone else but measured by my personal journey living without the use of alcohol and other drugs. I think young people are constantly adding little snippets of what recovery is and means to them and it looks different for each young person.

Colette: In your experiences, in what ways can the adults who interact with youth in schools and other environments (for example, school counselors, pediatricians, church leaders) support a young person to sustain their recovery?

Mike: I can only speak on behalf of my community and some of the experiences of other young people I know. For one, those serving and assisting young people should approach the issue with empathy and understanding. There is enough stigma associated with addiction already, deterring young people from asking for help. A large portion of society views addiction as a moral failing despite research and advances in the medical and

scientific communities. I think they can start with becoming educated on substance use disorders, understanding the stigmas associated, learn about the pathways of recovery that have been successful, support those young people with what they need to achieve their goals, and listen to them!

Lacie: In my experience, all of the adults in my life were so focused on the drug problem, they failed to see me as a person. They seemed to forget the strains of being young and the pressures that are put on us; pressure from trying to fit in, getting good grades in school, and even the biological and hormonal issues we are facing that non-addicted youth also face. Take all the normal pressures, add on pressure from parents and school faculty, and everyone else breathing down my neck telling me to quit using drugs, it only made me want to use more. I think that adults can truly help young people by not constantly pointing out all the things we are doing wrong; instead take a strength-based approach. Encourage me that I can be more than I am (the gentleman who finally did this with me, is the person who helped me actually want to reach for recovery). Understand that even though my issues may not seem big to adults, they are real to me.

There is a gaping hole in the services available to support recovery for young people with substance use disorders.

Colette: You all entered into recovery as young people and now you are actively volunteering in the recovery movement. From these experiences, what do you see as the biggest challenges young people are facing in maintaining their recovery?

Mike: There are a few issues that come to mind for me here in Las Vegas. First, I am noticing that some young people are afraid of missing out on fun and are afraid that they won't ever fit in if they are in recovery. Second, the lack of access to treatment services for young people here is a huge barrier for recovery. I believe there needs to be an increase of recovery pathway choices available to young people (i.e., recovery schools, youth-oriented 12-step programs, faith-based recovery options, SMART Recovery, etc.), instead of them being pushed in a particular pathway. Last, support is crucial for young people in high schools and colleges. I think recovery high schools and collegiate recovery programs would really help students maintain their recovery but also motivate other recovering young people to go back to school, especially if they have the support and a place to fit in.

Lacie: The biggest challenge for me was trying to realize my life was not over, and I could still have fun while being sober. My family was also a challenge because they had seen me be "sober" before, and then relapse. Convincing them that this time my recovery was real was difficult and took time. The hurt I caused others is still apparent today, and letting them down is one of my main reasons for keeping with my recovery.

Colette: By your estimation, how accessible are teen-focused recovery services and supports? Which types of supports have helped you sustain your recoveries?

Greg: Last year, when John de Miranda and I wrote the article, "Youth In Recovery," (*The Prevention Researcher*, Vol. 18, No. 2) we set out to investigate this specific question. While highlighting incredible proof of the existence of large youth and young adult recovery movements across the country, we were somewhat challenged to find comprehensive supportive services that promote their recovery. While they exist in certain states and communities there is a gaping hole in the services available to



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support recovery for young people with substance use disorders.

When I was 17 entering recovery I was not just a “small adult.” I had an entirely different language and methods for communicating with my peers than adults. Essentially, I came from a specific sub-culture. So just as we develop programs and services for specific languages, ethnicities, genders, and sexuality—we must develop recovery support services that are culturally competent for young people. Just as peer pressure can promote negative behaviors, it can also be used as a force for good. The members of YPR are living proof that young people have a unique power to help one another find, achieve, and sustain long-term recovery. Some of us have accessed treatment, some of us participate in 12-step mutual support programs, some of us went to an entire high school or university that supported our recovery, some us relied on our families for support, some of us lived in a sober house just for young people, and a few of us have been lucky enough to access all of these supports. The bottom line is that young people continue to die, become ill, get locked up, join gangs, and drop out of school—all unnecessary results of alcohol and other drug problems. YPR is organizing to advocate for improved access to all types of youth recovery supports that will help many more like us find and sustain long-term recovery—arguably the most fiscally responsible investment any local community or government can make.

Some examples of sustainable recovery supports for young people we are big fans of include:

- ◆ Recovery-oriented education programs (recovery schools)
- ◆ Alternative peer groups or peer leadership groups
- ◆ Peer life skills coaching (peer recovery coaching)
- ◆ Family involvement, support, and education
- ◆ Youth substance use disorder advocacy and education
- ◆ Recovery support vouchers through the federally-funded Access to Recovery program
- ◆ Telephone recovery support (post-treatment)
- ◆ Safe, sober, and age appropriate recovery housing options

Thank you Greg, Lacie, and Mike for answering our questions! While historically there have been few resources specifically tailored to the unique needs of youth in recovery, it is heartening to hear that this is starting to change. Adults, families, youth, schools, community programs, and researchers are beginning to work together to create the support systems necessary to help youth sustain their recovery. “YPR | Young People in Recovery” is at the forefront. For more information about this grassroots organization please visit youngpeopleinrecovery.org.

About our Interviewees:

Greg Williams, now 28, is a young person in long-term recovery since age seventeen and lives in Connecticut. He is the co-founder of Connecticut Turning to Youth and Families and is a behavioral health policy consultant and documentary filmmaker specializing in the creation of purpose-driven recovery content.

Lacie Vanover is a person in long-term recovery since 2004. She is pursuing her Master of Social Work at Union University and was accepted into their Advance Standing program. Her most important role in life is to be a mother, which drives her passion for excellence.

Michael Fildes is a young person in long-term recovery since November 2009. He currently attends the University of Nevada Las Vegas and works for the Foundation for Recovery, where he currently serves as the Coordinator for the HYPER Youth Recovery Initiative.

About our Interviewer:

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