

Dear Parents,

I am a parent whose child was at Ironwood. It was the hardest thing we have done to date, and that includes having buried parents, grandparents, friends, and other life altering events. I wrote this letter as a way of hoping to give back to Ironwood what they gave back to my husband and me: OUR CHILD.

Our son was smoking pot, stealing, failing school, and had become an unhappy, mean spirited child who had no remorse for his actions or behavior. He was like most of the residents there with his attitude and choice to seek the dark path of life.

We were told on a Friday afternoon that he had to go away NOW. It was like being sucker punched. We arranged for his transport and had to pretend all was right with the world until they came to get him. Those three days were days of pure hell and wondering were we doing the right thing. Safe and Sound or First Step Youth Transport are who I would recommend.

The transport team was the beginning of an amazing journey for him and for us. He went without a struggle and arrived at Ironwood safely. He greatly appreciated the respect he received from the transporters. That was followed by pure unadulterated hate directed at us as he sat in impact for three days.

The following is hopefully helpful in understanding all that will be happening to your child and to you as you begin this journey to healing.

"Residential treatment" means that your child lives here and adheres to the dynamics set up to teach your child accountability, responsibility, maturity, teamwork, and self-confidence. Your child will learn how to stay within strict boundaries and will learn swift and measurable consequences for falling out of the boundaries.

The first few days are incredibly intense. Each resident has his "Aha" moment and these moments occur at different times for each individual. During this time period please be aware that you will receive hand written mail from your child. It will not be pleasant. We called it hate mail because it arrived right on time every Friday in time to ruin the weekend and dissolve me into tears. The language can be intense, foul, and can strike at your most vulnerable place as a parent. IT IS NORMAL AND TO BE EXPECTED! DO NOT BE ALARMED OR DISCOURAGED.

Each person is here because they have made bad, even dangerous decisions. He/she is caught and scared and now lashes out looking for the weak spot that will get him/her out of this "predicament." Our son said that Ironwood was not like any thing on the internet or in a brochure. (He was thinking he should be in a resort!!)

The epiphany or AHA moment does come. We were told that our son was probably going to be as stubborn as they come and not to expect any breakthrough for several months. He surprised us all and it came after 3 weeks.

Each resident has a therapist, and they have individual therapy twice a week and group therapy once a week as well as anger therapy with the horses. ((Called Eagala= Equine Assisted Growth and Learning))

The therapists work gently and patiently with each child. Trust and confidence is built and then progress is made.

The stages through which each child goes are much like one sees in Elizabeth Kubler Ross's death and dying stages.

There is **DENIAL** (this went on at home. Then the child comes here) and initially there is DENIAL - "this isn't happening. It is a mistake."

Followed by **ANGER** (and LOTS of it). "I'll make you pay...you are wrong. I hate you. This is all your fault"., etc.

Then **BARGAINING**- "I promise I won't EVER do it again. Please get me out of here. I swear I wasn't doing anything. I promise I'll be good". You put the flavor of your child here. Here some will think they have the system figured out and will do only what they have to do to get out...to resume their "old" way of life.

Depression - a sense of giving up. Sinking into a hole. Therapists are trained to recognize signs and symptoms of real depression and there is a psychiatrist available to see the residents.

Acceptance- Healing begins here. When the child can begin to see that it was his/her decisions that got him/her here and no one else's, true healing and restoration begins.

Through physical labor (which expends energy, builds muscle, and actually balances many neurotransmitters and hormones), intense counseling, and strict boundaries, residents reclaim excellent mental and physical health. They are taught skills that will help them throughout life. They learn appreciation for the material things they have (had), for their families, for their community, and for themselves. They also learn to eat whatever is cooked for them!! They have no TV, internet, ipods, cell phones, computers, etc...NO distractions. All reading material should be self-help or inspirational. All the negative influences are withdrawn so they can concentrate on themselves.

The program is divided into four levels (orange, yellow, green, and blue) and there are privileges earned as they advance. There is true gratitude that develops and the residents see what it means to earn something and feel good about their own success.

They will learn how to recognize behaviors in others that are counter productive as well as self-

behaviors that need improvement, including anger management. They will have setbacks. Some advance to green and then go back to Orange. They learn that nothing in life is given, that they are the determiners of their actions and consequences, and they learn to be respectful and communicate clearly.

We learned how to express ourselves and to let our son know we love him no matter what while supporting his progress. Simultaneously we learned how to not reinforce his bad behavior and to put the onus of responsibility on him. Guess what, it is ok to say no and not negotiate with them!!

It is important that families at home also receive counseling to learn about family dynamics, triggers, body language, and other behaviors that can impair communication. Having healthy communication and recognizing dysfunctional patterns of behavior are crucial to help everyone in the family and to make coming home a positive event.

The stories are all similar. The pain we feel as parents is similar. The love we feel is the same. The goal should be improved communication between parents and children. The children do not go to Ironwood to be "fixed" and then return to the same situation. That is a recipe for failure. We as parents have to change as well. We did help them get here ...usually because we have given too much.

Your child will, make amazing progress. There will be amazing days and then some set backs as well. WE ALL HAVE THEM. It is part of life. How you handle and react to setbacks is the important issue. Even at the higher levels, there is work to be done, character improvements to be made, and new things to learn.

It is frustrating at times. That is part of the process. It is time for your child to learn to accept responsibility for his /her actions, and to learn what to do to be successful and to have healthy relationships.

The journey does not end with coming home. That is the real beginning and we must prepare for things to be different. You may have sent away a child but chances are an adult is returning home; or at least a more mature child with better communication skills.

It hurts that things got to this point. But they did. And we love our son enough to do what we can to save his life. Now it is up to him to take these gifts and use them to be happy, healthy, and successful. And he knows there are consequences for bad choices. He knows we can let him go with no support once he is 18. Is that hard? Yes. Is it necessary? Yes.

I hope this helps take the edge off what you are experiencing. It is the right choice. We wish you an amazing and successful Ironwood experience.

Written By:
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