

Most parents have a pretty good sense of who their child is developing to be by the time they are eight or nine years old. Sure, they still have a lot to learn, and their interests will evolve, but their basic personality is pretty well established.

Somewhere along the way, around age ten or eleven, our daughter's path took a sharp turn toward a dark and frightening future. She had always been bright, extroverted and funny, and she loved doing anything that involved being outdoors. But then she stopped doing her schoolwork, refused to participate in her normal activities, and became cynical and somber.

At first we wrote it off to a "phase," something she would simply grow out of on her own. But she continued to spiral downward. We discovered she had started cutting herself, and got her into therapy. But while the local therapist was able to help somewhat, the fundamental course of her life was not changed. She was severely oppositional and defiant, and extremely passive-aggressive with us. We also learned of other dangerous and self-destructive behaviors.

We were doing everything we could think of to help (and a few things that clearly *didn't* help), and we were at our wits' end. The bottom line was that we were failing our daughter, regardless of how hard we tried to help. It wasn't working.

A close relative of ours sent her son, who had been using a lot of drugs and getting mixed up with dangerous people, into a residential program somewhere in West Virginia. Her reaction some months later: "they gave me my son back!" She knew of our struggles with our daughter, and advocated for us to do the same. We looked into that program, but it didn't seem like a good match for our daughter and her situation and interests. So we kept doing what we were doing... even though it wasn't working.

The situation continued to deteriorate.

Finally, we found Ironwood. The web site was helpful, and we contacted the staff. They seemed to really understand "where we were" as a family. They sent us a packet of information, including letters like this one from parents of children who had been through the program. The horse and dog training programs were a perfect fit to our daughter's interests, and the structure and discipline of the place seemed designed to restore a connection between cause and effect — something our daughter had long since abandoned, preferring fatalism to accountability.

For us, the decision to send our daughter to Ironwood was absolutely the result of being out of options. From my point of view, this was an "all in" moment: either it would work as we hoped and prayed, or we would lose any chance of an ongoing relationship with our daughter in the future. There seemed little room for anything in between. But it was also clear that she was heading toward a miserable life if we did nothing. So what choice did we have, really?

We hired Safe and Sound to transport her to Ironwood, knowing we could not manage this task ourselves. Waiting that night for them to come for her was just about the hardest thing we have ever had to do, harder even than making the original decision about Ironwood. It made everything so final.

Each person in the family had written our daughter a letter, explaining that we loved her, and why we believed this step was necessary. She read these letters on the trip to Maine.

We had been warned to expect all five stages of grief coming from her:

- Denial (*"This isn't happening to me!"*)
- Anger (*"How could you do this to me? I hate you!"*)
- Bargaining (*"I promise I'll be good. I get it now. Please bring me home!"*)
- Depression (*"My life sucks. And now it's only getting worse."*)
- Acceptance (*"Okay, my life DID suck, and that's why I needed this."*)

From our perspective, the goal for Ironwood is to get the residents through the first four stages as quickly as possible, since the real growth can only start happening once the child has accepted that they need the help, and takes responsibility for moving his or her life in a positive direction.

Hearing those first four stages was tough, but easier than seeing her life continuing on the path it had been on. We made it clear that we had to rely on the professionals at Ironwood to help us decide when she was ready to come home. We'd rather bring her home two weeks late than ten minutes too soon. In our view, we had to get this thing right the first time. The stakes were too high.

We have been to three Parents' Weekends since she started. Even at the first one, when she was still in purple (Level 2), it was clear that the process was working, even though there was still much work to be done. We talked about some extremely difficult matters that weekend, things we had never been able to discuss openly with her. She was heading back to the personality that we would have expected from that energetic and fun nine-year-old girl she had been, and was turning into the wonderful woman she will be. The terrible detour was over.

Our daughter is still at Ironwood as I write this, mentoring some of the kids at Frye, and getting ready to come home herself. The improvements in self-esteem and confidence are absolutely remarkable. Her sense of humor is back, along with a lightness of being that we thought we would never see again. She has still been through some terrible experiences, something we cannot change. But she seems to have processed those experiences and learned from them, rather than simply suppressing them and letting them eat at her from the inside out. Those experiences could easily have destroyed her but, with Ironwood's help, they have made her stronger.

Best of all, she hugs us when we see her, and she talks to us about anything and everything that is important to her. In fact, she will probably be teaching *us* how to communicate more effectively about difficult subjects. Before Ironwood, she had suicidal thoughts and wanted nothing to do with us. She even talked about legal emancipation to get away from us. Thanks to Ironwood, she now wants us to be an important part of her life, and is looking forward to coming home to be with us. All this change happened in a matter of some months.

I am certain that we will all suffer occasional challenges going forward. Life won't suddenly become easy. But Ironwood has given us our daughter back, and given us the tools we need as a family to keep moving in a positive direction, even when life deals up some surprises.

I cannot recommend Ironwood highly enough. The program is amazingly comprehensive, the staff is remarkably talented and committed to the residents, and the facilities are simply stunning in their beauty and function. Even the relative isolation of "the middle of nowhere, Maine" is a huge benefit: it forces some quiet space on the kids and gives them room to do the thinking they need to do, without the distractions they would prefer to have.

For us, choosing Ironwood was an act of desperation. Close friends portray us as "brave" for taking this path with our child, but bravery simply didn't figure into it. We were at the end of our rope. We had no other options remaining. It was Ironwood, or giving up on our daughter and her future.

If anyone reading this letter is considering Ironwood for his or her child, I encourage you to call Ironwood to get my contact information. While I don't want to post my name and number on the internet, I would very much like to talk to anyone who feels they may be at the end of their own rope. I know the feeling.

There *is* hope. These are good people. They know what they are doing. They care about your kids.

They saved ours.