

## Marijuana IS a Gateway Drug

I started smoking cigarettes at age 12. At about 13 or 14, I was introduced to marijuana. At first, I was smoking it maybe once a week. This went on for about two years, then I started smoking more often. Eventually, I was smoking marijuana every day. I started skipping school and getting in trouble a lot with my mom, my step-dad and police officers.

In 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I was present only 74 days of the entire school year. I was stealing alcohol from my step-dad and filling the bottles back up with water. This led to me getting kicked out of my house a lot. By the age of 16, I was homeless and had progressed to using a wide range of pills. I was going from friend's house to friend's house, sleeping on couches. A lot of the time, I was sleeping in drug houses. I would take care of their kids so I would have a place to stay, and they were too inebriated to take care of them, so they would give me their prescription pills. If I didn't have the pills, I was looking for a way to get some. I had a full-blown addiction.

I dropped out of school. My mom didn't allow me at her house and wanted nothing to do with me. I didn't care; I had my prescription pills. Every day consisted of getting any pills I could, and even mixing them together. Some nights, I blacked out and didn't remember a thing. But the next day, I went out and got more drugs. I am surprised I'm alive.

It got to the point where a friend and I slept in a park bathroom. At age 18, I got caught shoplifting make-up while high. I was arrested, but my case was dismissed. I moved back to Decatur to live with my dad and get clean. I wanted to get clean so my niece wouldn't see me in jail, but I continued to smoke marijuana. I didn't get back on pills as bad, though. I got a job, but all my money went to cigarettes, phone minutes, or marijuana. Eventually, I just quit my job. My family relationships were ruined, including my relationship with my mom and step-dad. I tried moving home, but it didn't last a week. Marijuana ruled my life. Nothing else seemed to matter.

I moved from place to place. Sometimes I hid my marijuana addiction. Sometimes, I didn't bother and bought for other people, too. I got it for them as long as they would share. Unfortunately, the weed wasn't calming my nerves like it used to. Instead, I was becoming more and more paranoid.

I continued to smoke until I got caught for possession of marijuana in November 2015. Officers showed up at my house looking for the previous owner. They could smell the marijuana I'd been smoking. That just goes to show you don't have to be out driving around to get caught. I was at home and got caught. It's still against the law. I'm on probation for a year, have to do counseling and attend *Thinking for Good* classes. I'm also facing the possibility of six months in jail. The counseling and classes have helped open my eyes to my bad habits, to recognize my triggers, understand my anger issues, and are helping me move towards a place of trust and honesty. I realized my way of thinking is really messed up. I had gone to counseling before, but I didn't take it seriously. I have a great counselor and refuse to switch to anyone else for any reason; he takes the time to really listen to me.

I know I need to get healthy for myself and for my family. I'm taking classes to get my high school diploma and have stayed clean. Now, I have an apartment and I have a job. I pay my bills. I have my driver's license. I plan to go to

college; I never would have thought I would ever go to college. I feel really good now. I also understand that if I smoke marijuana, I'll go to jail, and that's enough to keep me from smoking. The desire isn't even there anymore.

Marijuana is a gateway drug to other drugs. If I hadn't started smoking marijuana, I never would have tried the other drugs. If I had known before how bad marijuana was, I never would have started smoking it. One thing leads to another and before you know it, you are smoking it every day. You're spending hundreds of dollars with nothing to show for it. I would feel physically sick and almost get violent if I wasn't smoking. I would sell anything I owned to get money for marijuana.

I want parents to know they need to pay attention to who their kids are hanging out with. Know their friends, where they are and what they are doing. Are their eyes red? That's a sign you need to be watching for. So are things like your child not wanting to do anything anymore, or not being motivated to do what they usually enjoy doing. Are they often asking for money? These are all red flags.

People need to realize that drugs are a problem, one that will lead to greater problems. Hopefully, stories like this will open the eyes of our community. Drugs are a big problem and can affect us all.

As told to Kelly Sickafoose