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## **Doug Stone: Maria's Story - She Overcame Her Demons**

This is the story of a courageous teenager who overcame drug addiction and a road to nowhere. It is a story about Maria, 17, a neighbor and a daughter of my friends Joe and Stephanie, who helped Maria fight her demons and whose family became closer as a result. Three weeks ago, on Maria's second anniversary of sobriety, she got up in front of more than 200 people at her 12-step recovery meeting and told about her battle with drugs and alcohol.

"I was so nervous," she told me recently. "By the time I got up there I started to cry. It was embarrassing. They were tears of joy."

I'm telling her story because it moved me so much and because as the father of a teenage daughter and another daughter approaching her teens, I think we parents and kids can learn a lot from young people like Maria.

"As a kid I felt confused," she says. "But happy at the same time."

It all started in 6th grade when she says she smoked marijuana one day at her house with her older brother's friends. Her mom was sleeping and her dad was at a Twins game.

"I saw everyone being happy, having a good time," she says. "It was appealing. I felt high. It opened up a new door to life.... Smoking pot and drinking was what I had in common with people."

She says she started smoking more and drinking and doing other drugs. "I kept meeting people who have

drugs or dealt them," she says. "There's a huge network...Pot was the easiest thing to find."

She says she did drugs through 7th and 8th grade, but not on a daily basis. She started to hang out with older kids, especially high school kids.

"Getting high became a necessity of life," Maria says, and she started using more serious drugs like mushrooms, cocaine and ecstasy.

"I figured out all the tricks to mask my drug use," she says "I kept my grades up and did more chores so my parents wouldn't notice."

In the middle of 8th grade and into her freshman year in high school, doing drugs became a daily activity, Maria says. In her freshman year, friends would pick her up before school and they'd go to a nearby golf course to get high on marijuana.

By her freshman year, her grades began to plummet, a telltale sign of drug use, her dad says now. And then there was the incident when she woke up and couldn't talk. She doesn't remember what drugs she had done. At the emergency room at a Minneapolis hospital, the doctor thought she might have burst a blood vessel in her head. Just after the hospital incident, a friend of her brother's confronted her and said she had to tell her parents about her drug use or else he would. So Maria told her parents the truth and she went to a treatment program at Hazelden for 28 days.

"But I didn't want to be sober," she says. The very first day home from the program, she convinced her



mom to let her hang out with a sober friend, but she actually met up with some of her drug and alcohol-using friends. They went out drinking and spray painting and were eventually stopped by the police.

She went to a sober high school in Minneapolis, but was kicked out for using ecstasy. She enrolled in a sober school in St. Paul, but continued to use. It was easier for her to get drugs than alcohol, she says.

She was stealing money to buy drugs and hanging out with other kids who had money. "You're using everybody for something," Maria says.

Despite her efforts to mask her drug use, she failed a drug test at the second sober high school. Her latest lie was that she had mistakenly licked a bag in her brother's room. But she knew it wouldn't wash.

"I got sick and tired of being sick and tired," she says. "I wanted to be sober so I listened" at her second time back at Hazelden in the spring of 2007. From her treatment program, she entered Sobriety High West Academy, a charter school in Edina started 20 years ago.

"I wanted to be sober...I couldn't go back. I couldn't hang with people who weren't sober," she says. "If you're sober, your old friends don't want anything to do with you. They weren't really friendly. We all just kind of used each other."

Maria attends 12-step meetings a couple times a week. She's getting good grades in school. She does volunteer work and helps other kids at her school who are trying to stay sober.

"My head is a lot clearer now," she says. "I didn't care about my life before. My dream was living in a van, smoking pot. Now I'm a lot happier. I want to go to college instead of living like a zombie."

For Joe and Stephanie, it's been a roller coaster ride. "We had our suspicions, we were worried, but we didn't know what to do" Joe says. "We blamed each other. It puts stress on the relationship. You think you're alone. You feel shame. You blame yourself."

But through Hazelden and Sobriety High, the family has found great resources and support. "Once you start to talk to people, you realize you are not alone," Joe says. "It makes the family closer."

In a strange way, Joe says, the last several years, despite the struggles and the hardships, have had a positive outcome for Maria and the family. "Maria has skills to take with her for the rest of her life," Joe says. "She will be able to deal with these issues as she grows up."

For her part, Maria says she feels lucky. "I'm glad I want to be sober," she says. "You really have to want it. I did everything and anything to get high. Now I want to do everything and anything not to get high. I feel more confident that I can get by day to day."

After Maria told her story at her two-year anniversary, people came up to shake her hand, congratulate her on her hard work and hug her. I wasn't there, but I hugged her just the same after our talk. Good going, Maria. You should feel really proud.

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