

boston.com

7+616725<+ \$61% (1) 250 \$77(') 251(\$6<135,17,1 *

Young 'ambassadors' share stories of addiction, recovery

The Boston Globe

By Joanna Massey, Globe Staff | July 8, 2004

Boredom led her to alcohol and marijuana when she was 12, which in turn led to heroin use and a stint in a juvenile detention facility by age 17.

Now 18, Danielle is doing her part to make sure other youths don't chart a similar path. Speaking last week to about 120 summer campers at the Boys & Girls Club of Brockton, the Weymouth resident gave stark details of how her drug addiction caused her to drop out of school, steal from loved ones, and eventually face arrest.

"I got into drugs for the stupidest reason -- because I was bored and never had anything to do; now I wish I had just found something else to do," she said. "I ruined my life, and my mother's, too."

Danielle is one of several recovering drug addicts touring the state this summer as part of an eight-week Clean Summer Series, aimed at keeping youngsters off drugs. The "ambassadors" with the Brookline-based National Library of Addictions Inc. asked that their full names not be published for privacy reasons.

The recovering addicts, who are scheduled to speak tomorrow at 9 a.m. at the Germantown Neighborhood Center in Quincy, are led by Dr. Punyamurtula S. Kishore, an addiction specialist who founded the National Library of Addictions, a multidisciplinary educational and research facility, in 1993.

Kishore, who said the average age of patients at his practice is "dropping like a brick," said Massachusetts has the fastest-growing percentage of people with addictions in the country. According to his research, heroin addiction in the state is three times the national rate.

He said he started the Clean Summer Series program to help provide students as young as elementary school age with the keys to drug prevention during a time of the year primed for misbehavior.

"Drug addiction is a silent epidemic," Kishore said. "A lot of these kids come from dysfunctional families, but that doesn't mean they have to be dysfunctional."

One of his group's other ambassadors, a 16-year-old from Winchester named Jamie, preaches a corresponding message. Raised by an alcoholic father who experimented with cocaine, Jamie said she was hooked on the drug by age 11, and also abused heroin and the painkiller OxyContin.

In and out of detox programs for the past five years, she has become sober only within the last month, she said.

"I'm really lucky I'm not dead yet," Jamie said. "This whole thing has brought me nothing but being miserable. I never want any of you to go through that."

Since most of the ambassadors are still in their teens and newly sober, their experiences are fresh and their presentations powerful, Kishore said.

"When Jamie says, 'I'm in so much pain coming off drugs,' the kids react to that a lot more than me using the medical language of saying she's in withdrawal," he said. "They speak the kids' language, and [the youths] react to that."

At the Brockton summer camp last Thursday, students ages 8 to 18 quizzed Kishore and the ambassadors about everything from the differences between "good and bad drugs" to the reasons why alcohol advertisements are shown on television.

While some questions showed an obvious naiveté, others revealed what Kishore called "a frightening level of

knowledge" about drugs.

"If you're on drugs, how come you look so healthy?" said one boy, who said he is going into the fifth grade.

Breaking a smile for the first time, Jamie explained: "You start to get your looks back when you're clean."

Another student asked Danielle, a brunette wearing a Boston Celtics jersey, whether she and her mother get along now that she is off drugs.

"Yeah, it's a lot better now," Danielle said quietly.

Sharon Conant, a case manager with the Boys & Girls Club of Brockton, said programs like the Clean Summer Series work best when younger students make a connection with someone they look up to and can learn from. Even if the recovering drug addicts are able to inspire just one child to stay away from drugs, the program is a success, she said.

"We're just trying to keep kids off the street and safe," Conant said.

Kishore said organizers at some of the locations where the ambassadors have spoken, including the Boys & Girls Club of Taunton, have asked them to come back to work directly with more high-risk students.

"The message is that you don't have to follow the leader," he said. "We want these kids to demand more of their lives."

Joanna Massey can be reached at massey@globe.com. ■

I & RS \U K W I I I 17KH1 HZ I < RUN7 LP HM & RP SDQ

I