

Brenda's Story

A Boise youth tells of abuse, neglect — and survival

By Glenn Oakley

On Christmas Day when she was 11 years old, Brenda tried to hang herself in her basement bedroom. Over the next five years the Garden City girl would try three more times — by slashing her wrists and by overdosing on pills — to end her troubled life.

Brenda's story is harrowing, but given her life history the surprise is not that she would become addicted to drugs, get into trouble with authorities and attempt suicide. The surprise is that she has, at least for now, kicked the drugs and is working to straighten out a most twisted life. As for the drugs and suicide attempts, says her counselor Pam Carson, "Could it have been any other way?"

Brenda was born 16 years ago. She lives at her mother's house in Garden City with an 18-year-old half sister and her baby, a 17-year-old half brother and an ever-changing parade of her mother's friends. The police are frequent visitors to her home. She has been suspended from



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RESCUE PROJECT NEEDS HELP

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For two and a half years the BSU-sponsored Boise Family Project has worked to intercept troubled kids before they end up in jail. Now the project needs its own financial interception to keep running.

"The project was designed to work with youth getting in trouble, before they become actual delinquents," says social work professor and project coordinator Juanita Hepler. "Because the research shows when you get kids involved in the court system they're more likely to get involved with crime and become repeat offenders."

The project is directed by Debbie Kristal and Dave Scudder from Boise State's public affairs research center, and the cases are handled by four professional counselors who were BSU master of social work students when the program was started.

The project has two programs, explains Hepler: Level 1 and 2. Level 1 is for first time status offenders; youths who have violations for truancy, runaway, curfew or out-of-control behavior. These youths and their families, directed by the courts, school resource officers or others, attend a four-hour Saturday session led by Hepler. "We work with both the youth and families on communication skills and anger management," she explains.

Youths with two or more offenses are elevated to level 2, a series of up to eight private sessions with the youth, the family and the counselor. "Most of the parents [coming into the program] are really stressed out, angry or desperate," says Hepler. "The parents feel they are out of

control. They cannot make that kid do something." But, she says, "We won't let the family make the child the problem." Instead, the counselors guide the family into setting a goal and "specific steps to reach that goal."

The project has been funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, and Hepler notes that money from the grant has been used in a number of seemingly unorthodox ways. "We've helped to pay repair bills on cars. We've paid for medication. We've given money to send kids to camp. We've given money to give a kid fiddle lessons."

Hepler says such expenditures solve problems which are sometimes rooted in poverty. The repaired car was needed to transport a working mother to her job and take the youth to counseling. The fiddle lessons were for a youth who was angry and acting out, but dearly wanted to learn to play the fiddle. "Anything we can get this kid into that is positive" is worth a try, explains Hepler.

Most of the families referred to the project are working class or poor, she says, adding that middle class and wealthier families will usually do whatever they need to do to keep their kids out of the legal system.

There is now a waiting list for counseling, says Hepler. But without financial intervention the project will end soon.

Hepler laments the termination of the project, one of the few juvenile crime programs that has not featured punishment as its focal point. "The nice thing about this program is it really is prevention and family oriented," she says. □

Mountain Cove, a school for troubled kids. She is on probation as a runaway, and is in a counseling program directed by Boise State social work professor Juanita Hepler. Her counselor, Carson, is a recent graduate from the BSU master's program in social work.

Brenda's earliest memories are of getting drunk. "I used to get alcohol all the time from my real dad," she states plainly. "My real dad used to get me drunk. It started at 2 years old. He'd stick it in my baby bottle. It was the only way he could get me quiet."

By the age of 8 she was smoking marijuana before and after school. "I had a stepdad that was a drug addict," she says. "I met his friends, carried on with all of them."

Brenda accepted her family life as normal. "It was my lifestyle. ... I seen it all around me when I was 8 years old. So I thought it was OK. My mom's and my dad's friends were getting us high."

She chafed against the restrictions she encountered when visiting the homes of her school friends. Today, however, she laments the lack of structure and discipline in her life.

While at Hillside Junior High School Brenda says she started hanging out with a gang — not a real gang, she notes, "just a whole bunch of kids that get together and think they're real bad." She says she joined them so she "wouldn't get heat up on any more and so I would have friends." By this time Brenda was heavily into drugs: snorting crack, heroin and cocaine on a daily basis.

Her home life continued to deteriorate. She says she was beaten by her stepdad for not standing up to other kids at school. Her clothes were regularly stolen from her room by the many transients passing through the house. There was rarely any food in the house, but at least the drugs killed her hunger. "And I was told that I was a slut. And I started believing it. My mom would even call me a slut. ... And that was after we were being raped by this old guy down the road."

Brenda explains that her best friend's grandfather was regularly raping several children in the neighborhood. "We never told nobody. We all were scared. He threatened us: 'You tell and I'll kill you or you'll never see your family again.'" When Brenda's mother finally learned of the rapes, Brenda says her response was, "It's too late now, we can't do nothing." Brenda never received counseling for the rapes.

At school, she says, "They always tried to get me to go to them [counselors]. But I wouldn't talk to them 'cause I didn't feel comfortable. I felt they were going to tell the state and I was going to get removed from my home."

In Boise Brenda was eventually sent to Mountain Cove, a school for "troublemakers, nothing but troublemakers." She did not last long there. Last year she was expelled

for missing too many days. She says she will attend a program at Boise State this fall to earn her GED.

Since the age of 11, Brenda has been periodically kicked out of her house over disputes with her mother's boyfriends. "And that's when I picked up this suicide attempt," she explains. "And it's because I was being brainwashed that my mom didn't love me no more." Brenda says family members including her brother and sister continually told her that her mother didn't want anything to do with her. "And then one day on Christmas I hung myself. I said my mom don't love me, so I don't want to live."

Brenda was found hanging by her sister and the family untied her. But the event was not discussed, she says, and she never visited a counselor to deal with the suicide attempt. More attempts were soon to come.

Brenda says the first attempts at suicide were probably her way of letting people know she was hurting. But, she adds, "The last time I didn't care whether I died or not."

Her second suicide attempt was over a boyfriend. "I told him if he left me I'd kill myself," she says. After getting in a fight over the telephone, Brenda recalls, "I said heck with it after he hung up. I walked down the road. I had a knife in my hand. And I went back to the lake and I was just listening to the water. And I just tightened my muscles and tried to slice my wrists." She

changed her mind after making several cuts. A day and a half later her mother noticed blood on her arm, she says. This time she was taken to the hospital where she was put on antidepressant drugs.

Shortly after she quit taking the antidepressants she broke up with another boyfriend. "Everybody was going through my head," she says. "I got up and took all these pills at once, then lay down and started crying, listening to that song, 'Love Hurts.'"

She ended up in the hospital again. That suicide attempt seems to have triggered a gradual change in Brenda.

For the first time in years, perhaps her life, Brenda has found some structure and hope for the future. Ironically, this change came partly because of her suicide attempt and a subsequent arrest as a runaway. After once again being kicked out of her house, Brenda was living with her sister. Her mother decided she wanted them back and filed charges against Brenda as a runaway.

Placed on probation by the courts, Brenda was directed to Carson in the Boise Family Center intervention program. When Brenda came to see Carson last February she had of her own volition started to detoxify herself by quitting her extensive drug habit cold turkey. "She looked horrible," recalls Carson. "She looked like death. She weighed about 80 pounds. She was dirty, she was pale."

Over time, on an irregular basis, Brenda

began confiding in Carson. In turn, Carson began teaching Brenda how to more constructively deal with her problems and to call her whenever things got so bad that suicide loomed as an option.

Brenda now writes down her feelings, filling pages with her emotions. She and other girls from the neighborhood have also filed charges against the man she accused of raping her.

Carson thinks that Brenda can heal herself, but it will be a long, gradual process as she becomes more independent and can free herself from a toxic family life.

And while Brenda's story is probably shocking to most Idahoans, it is certainly not shocking to those who work with troubled kids.

"The teen-agers I see are coming from families with no structure whatsoever," says Carson. "Mom and dad are on drugs. Mom and dad are drinkers. There's three and four and five marriages. There's all kinds of men in and out of the house. There's nothing they can depend on that's predictable. And then they get to be teen-agers and they start acting out and making stupid choices. And now we're supposed to get tougher on them and that's somehow going to fix it all. I think it will backfire.

"Brenda doesn't need people to be tougher on her. She needs somebody she can trust and listen to her. That's all she needs." □

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