

## VIEWS FROM THE RAD

*These essays stemmed from a writing workshop held for young men in the Secure Residential Alcohol and Drug Program (RAD) in Multnomah County, Oregon. The workshop was facilitated by Sara Brant of Write Around Portland (www.writearound.org). Write Around Portland transforms lives by using the power of writing to connect the diverse people of the city—people affected by HIV/AIDS, people in prison, survivors of domestic violence, individuals recovering from addictions, people with physical and/or mental disabilities, refugees, and others.*

Since I was three years old, I have been involved with services that were supposed to help me—foster care, individual counseling, jail, probation, and substance abuse treatment. In my case, most of this helping did not work out very well. By 14, I was basically living on the streets and progressing towards using more

*Once you're in, it's hard to get out. Harder than any other gang because it's on paper. It's the biggest gang ever; besides, it's the government—it's institutional. I got in when I was eleven—I was doing stupid little kid stuff and was caught during a burglary. It has been a good experience, but one of the hardest things I've ever done. Little stuff that cops would let you off on, once they find out you're on probation—down you go. When I first got put in, I knew I could have gotten out that night but my parents didn't want to come pick me up. If only I'd known it was a turning point. Now I've been in the system for six long years and I feel like it has robbed me of my childhood.*

*-- Vincent Gilbert*

and more serious drugs. All this investment in helping me might have been more useful if two things had been different. First, people could have been a lot more honest with me. What people have said they care about and what they have said they are doing has not matched what they actually seemed to care about or what they actually did. Second, I should have had some input or chances to make choices about what I needed. Instead, people were constantly dictating to me or giving me ultimatums. There have been times when I knew exactly what kind of help I wanted, but people either acted like what I needed was completely unreasonable, or pretended that there was no problem at all. Now, I have chosen to be sober. I am living in a home, going to school, and making a plan for a future I want. Partly this is because of help I received in the substance abuse program, but I did not really buy in to what staff there were telling me. They were not always honest about the program or themselves. Mostly I took in the information and then made my own choices to help myself.

My dad was an alcoholic. My mom was a drug addict. She didn't take care of my two brothers and me, and she gave us to state custody when I was three. I haven't seen either of my parents in more than 12 years. From when I was three to when I was 13, I was in foster care in one home. When I was 13, I began running away. At that time, I was also drinking and smoking marijuana. I would stay away for a while, then get caught and do eight days in jail. What made me run was that the foster parents were not providing a home for my brothers and me.



My foster mother was gambling away money that was supposed to be for our care. She was playing video poker, buying scratch-offs, and going to casinos. There wasn't any food in the house. It was not a happy place to be. From ages nine to eleven, I had been getting individual counseling. I would try to tell them that where I am living, there is no food. They are not feeding us or caring for us. We need a different placement. But no one seemed to care, they wouldn't listen to that and there was no help. Counseling me was not going to fix that situation. I tried to tell my PO [probation officer] the same thing.

I first got arrested for being drunk in public, and then got dirty UAs for marijuana. The guidelines of my probation were very strict. They wanted me to never miss school, keep my job, not miss one appointment. And the consequences were extreme. They'd send me to jail for a dirty UA. To me

*I got into the judicial system by hanging out with the wrong crowd. It all started by someone asking me if I smoked weed and I wanted to be cool so I was an idiot and said, "Of course." And then I was always a troublemaker—doing stupid stuff like having the cops come for breaking my neighbor's window because I threw a brick at my older sister and she ducked. And as I got older, when I was around twelve, I started to get into major trouble. The little things added up: shoplifting, breaking into cars and stealing stereos, robbing houses. Then I broke into a store but my parents paid my debt and I still wasn't in the judicial system until I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Then I met a kid and we broke into three schools and caused \$35,000 of damage. I got probation for about five years—until I'm 18—and while I've been on probation I've been terrible; failing drug tests and breaking into more stores, doing a lot more shoplifting. It's just an ongoing tornado of negative things. After so much stuff, my probation officer was taking it easy on me and I was lucky. But my life went downhill when I got a male probation officer. I started getting longer sentences than I usually would have and then my attorney said that they were thinking of MacLaren. And I didn't think I could handle it so they said, "You've got a choice." And my choice was that I got to go to MacLaren or RAD. I picked RAD and here I am. Been in two months and my counselor thinks that I'm doing very well; so do I. All I really want is to finally succeed and be someone who is sober and not a drug addict.*

*-- Kyle Malone*

there was no way I was going to be able to meet the expectations, no matter how hard I tried. It would either be that I'd try to do what they wanted and get put in jail, or run and end up in jail. So I ran for good. For about a year and a half I lived on the streets. I would go from friend's house to friend's house or stay in abandoned

cars. I slowly progressed from smoking meth to using IV drugs. In the end, after about a year and a half, I just got tired of it all. It's tiring living that way and looking over your shoulder all the time, trying not to get caught. I knew that if I just told the police my name I would be in jail. But eventually that's what I did.

I spent a month in detention and then I had a choice to go into drug treatment. They told me that if I completed drug treatment for six months and stayed on probation for six months I could be done, so I focused on that. For the first four months in the program I didn't think it was helping at all. I thought it was a waste of time. We had individual sessions and groups, and they would show a lot of videos to try to raise your awareness of what drugs would do to you. They would force it on you, and you would get consequences for it if you said anything negative. You had to put on a mask and act like it was helping. If you didn't put in that effort, they'd kick you out. Some kids would get kicked out and go to MacLaren [the state secure facility], which is a way more horrible place where you have absolutely no protection.

Day in and day out, staff in the program tell you that they want to make it so that you can help yourself in the future. At first I didn't believe it, but day in and day out they'd be there and if I wanted to talk they were there. Eventually I realized that being sober was not going to kill me. I couldn't be in drug treatment for six months and not learn something, and after a while it was hard to deny that they were there to help. But I never wanted to participate, it just got easier to fake it. I never did feel like I let the mask down.

When I completed the program, I went to live with the family of a friend I have had for a long time. I had stayed with them some when I was couch surfing. When I got finished with the program, his parents said they would be foster parents, so now I am living in a house and have food and am working toward my GED, things I

would never have had if I hadn't gone through the program. I am planning to continue my education and get a decent job in construction. My foster dad has a construction business where my younger brother and I both work.

I do feel like I was helped, but I think the drug treatment program would have been more effective if staff had given honest explanations about what the program was really like. They say it's better than jail but you are locked in. They say that the staff is only positive, but all in all 80% of what they have to say is negative. They are supposed to inspire you but what we heard was "You're not going anywhere, you're not going to get anything in life, you're a drug addict." You are forced to do what they say be-

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*The system locks you up and you're supposed to make good decisions and get your life back on track. But when they lock you up, they surround you with people that are just as bad as you, if not worse. And if someone wants to challenge you then you have to meet that challenge or be branded as the bitch on the unit.*

*Incarceration is supposed to be an experience that teaches you and sets you forward in life. But from my perspective incarceration is a punishment that only holds you back. I personally think that the Juvenile Justice System is a test of strength. If you got what it takes then you can get off with probation. If you don't, then MacLaren is in your future. I honestly think that running from the law would be easier than abiding by it.*

*When you get into the system there is no turning back. And that's exactly how they made it. When they lock you up, that's when they see your soft spots. And they use your every weakness to their advantage. So basically, the justice system is a black hole that targets adolescents—once it gets a grasp on you, there is no return.*

*-- Eric Wise*

cause if you don't, they send you to jail. I learned in the program, but I did not trust the program.

What happened around when I was 13 was definitely not helpful. It will ruin your life trying to live with someone you don't want to live with—someone who is abusive or neglecting. I tried to tell people that this was not the place for me, but nothing changed. And when I got put on probation, I knew I could not possibly succeed in meeting their expectations. It might have worked out better if people had cared about what I thought and what I had to say, and if they had worked with me some instead of only telling me what I had to think and do.



**-Eric Wise**