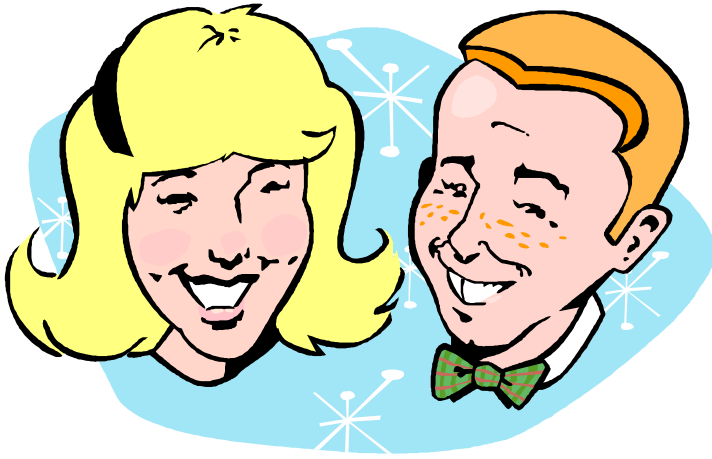


Booklet 16

Helps for Young People



I Just Couldn't Say No

I Just Couldn't Say No

They kept offering me drugs, and I kept turning them down. But then I figured, Why not just this once?

by Jason Gomez as told to Christy Heitger-Casbon

When I glanced at my watch—6:55 p.m.—I couldn't believe there were only five minutes left of youth group ... ever. Tears stung my eyes as flashbacks of retreats, church lock-ins, pizza parties, and progressive dinners filled my head.

As we bowed our heads and grasped hands for the closing prayer, I found myself tightening my grip. Both physically and emotionally, I didn't want to let go.

The clock struck 7, and everyone began hugging and saying goodbye. My friends were excited about leaving Tallahassee and heading off to different colleges, but I didn't share in their excitement. I was staying in my hometown to attend Florida State University. I wasn't moving anywhere—not even out of my parents' house.

As my friends exited the room, I stood there frozen, feeling alone, afraid and abandoned.

Out of Place

That fall, my pastor suggested I attend InterVarsity Christian Fellowship meetings on campus. I took his advice, but from the beginning, I felt out of place. After talking to several members, it became clear why. Most everyone was talking about their wives, husbands and dissertations—almost all of them were graduate students.

Where are all the undergrads? I wondered.

Desperate for Christian fellowship, I continued attending meetings, but I didn't enjoy them. So after a semester, I quit going. Mom suggested I try another Christian organization, but I vetoed that idea. Why risk feeling misplaced or rejected?

With no friends, no girlfriend—not even a college roommate—I felt lonely and depressed. So I started building a stronger relationship with two guys, Rick and Brian,* whom I'd known since middle school but had never hung out with.

One day, I was complaining to them about how miserable freshman year was. I was not at all prepared for Rick's response.

"Pot will chase your blues away," he promised as he pulled out some marijuana and lit a joint.

My eyes widened. "Nn-nn-noooo, thanks," I stammered nervously. As the smell of marijuana permeated the room, I grew tense. I considered leaving but didn't want to look like a dork.

"We're hitting a club tonight," Brian said. "Come with us."

"Yeah, come on," Rick urged.

Forget it! I thought, then wondered, *If I say no, will they reject me?*

"You'll have fun," Brian promised.

I was still sceptical, but since I knew I could resist drugs, I figured there was no harm in tagging along.

For the next month, I went to a bunch of parties. The drill always seemed the same: People offered me drugs. I declined. And then they'd look at me funny. Some even asked why I came if I wasn't getting high. After awhile, I started asking myself the same question.

Maybe I should say yes just once, I thought. After all, it seemed safe enough—no one was vomiting, blacking out, or being carried out on a stretcher.

One night I sat down next to a girl with long, red hair and deep green eyes. She offered me her joint.

"One time won't hurt you," she said simply.

I caved. I reached for the joint, placed it between my lips, and inhaled.

This isn't right, I thought. *I should stop*. But as I scanned the room, I suddenly realized I wasn't the out-cast anymore. As I continued inhaling and the drug took effect, my guilt faded. Rick was right; pot was chasing my blues away. For the first time in a long while, I was happy, relaxed and accepted.

Party On

Within weeks, I was smoking pot daily. Concentrating on school became more and more of a struggle. Since I lived at home, my parents soon noticed their son was a doped-up mess. When they begged me to stop and I refused, they adopted the "tough love" mentality and kicked me out, hoping I'd seek help. But I didn't want help. I just wanted to get high.

A sober friend felt sorry for me and let me move in with him, but because I spent all my money on drugs, I couldn't afford rent. He soon booted me out.

I quickly learned the fine art of mooching and began hopping from place to place, crashing on different friends' floors. Most of those friends were junkies, and they exposed me to more drugs, including acid (LSD), cocaine, crack, crystal meth, heroin and Ecstasy.

Although I didn't have any living expenses, I was still broke—and desperate for drugs.

One Friday night, I asked a dealer what I could trade for cocaine.

"I like your pants," he told me. "Hand 'em over, and I'll set you up."

Without hesitation, I stripped down to my underwear and gave him my pants. My pride had vanished. So had my morals. Without

so much as a glimmer of guilt, I began stealing from the fast-food restaurant where I worked in order to support my addiction.

Dancing with Death

One night at a party I tried magic mushrooms. Initially, I was impressed by the euphoric effect. But soon I began hallucinating. My paranoid eyes darted around the room as I watched my friends with heightened suspicion; I was sure they were trying to kill me. Dizziness overwhelmed me. As sweat rolled down my forehead, I glanced at my chest and saw my heart pounding hard and fast through my shirt.

Am I dying? Petrified and confused, I pleaded with a friend to take me to my parents' house.

When Mom opened the door, her face turned white.

"What's wrong with you?" she gasped.

"I'm dying, Mom! I'm going crazy. I'm dying," I kept repeating as my trembling hands reached out to her.

Scared for my life, Mom frantically called 911.

The paramedics and police arrived to a chaotic scene. Mom was hysterical, and my younger brother and sister watched in horror as the police handcuffed me, put me in the ambulance, and rushed me to the hospital. There, doctors pumped my stomach to empty the drugs from my system.

My near-death experience scared me enough to abandon drugs for a few weeks. But I was miserable and lonely, so one night when my friend, Danielle, told me about a party she was going to, I went along.

I arrived at the party and immediately felt at home. "Here—have some Ecstasy," Danielle offered. I considered saying no, but I couldn't resist. Soon I was flying.

Why did I ever stop? I wondered. *This is awesome!* Then a shriek from the bathroom shattered my hypnotic state. I rushed to see what was wrong.

"They won't move!" Danielle cried, referring to two guys lying on the floor motionless, staring into space.

I kneeled down and studied their hollow, lifeless eyes.

"What are they on?" I asked a guy who'd been partying with them.

"Ecstasy," he said. "They must've gotten a bad batch."

Shivers shot through my spine. I was also high on Ecstasy.

Will I end up in a coma, too? Or worse? I panicked. I've beaten the odds before, but how many times can I dance with death before it claims me?

I knew then that things needed to change. *If I survive this, I promised myself, I'm gonna stop.*

I left the party and crashed at a junkie's trashed apartment. I sat down in the kitchen and cradled my head in my hands. Haunted by the vision of the two guys from the party, I thought, *That could've been me! My life is so messed up!* Wallowing in self-pity, I asked, *Why has this happened to me?*

Then I realized this hadn't happened to me. I did it to myself. It suddenly made perfect sense. I'm at this dead end because I've cut God out of my life. It was the most profound, yet simple, revelation I'd ever had.

I fell to my knees sobbing, "Please forgive me, Lord! I've been sinning, and I'm so sorry. Help me!" I pleaded. For hours, I continued pouring out my heart to him. Then, drawing from his strength, I picked up the phone, called my parents, and asked for help.

Road to Freedom

Mom had a friend who told her about a Bible-based organization called Teen Challenge. Through a yearlong residential program, they help adolescents deal with life-controlling problems and focus on total rehabilitation—including emotional, social, educational and spiritual growth. When Mom told me about it and explained it was in Athens, West Virginia, I hesitated.

I'll be cut off from drugs, my friends, from everything I know. How will I survive? But despite my fear, I was determined to get straight.

As my parents drove me to West Virginia, I stared out the car window and watched the scenery whiz by. That's what my life had felt like lately—fast, blurry, disoriented. I prayed my time at Teen Challenge would bring me peace and stability.

When we arrived at the centre, I felt rattled. *What've I done?* Dozens of worried thoughts went through my head. But then Jim, the director of the program, put me at ease.

"Don't be nervous," he said. "I'm not here to judge you. I'm here to help."

I looked closely at his friendly, sincere eyes and felt safe. I knew the road ahead would be hard, but his warm reassurance told me I wouldn't walk it alone.

Living Through Christ

During group sessions, we confessed our sins and discussed our addictions. When I saw the frustration and hurt in their eyes, I knew exactly how they felt. Over the next few months, as we shared our stories and prayed together, their support helped me move toward freedom.

One day at group, Jim asked me, "How have you changed since you stopped doing drugs?"

"When I was using, my heart was empty and bitter," I explained. "But now I'm filled with Christ's love."

"What's that like?" Jim asked.

I closed my eyes and thought. "It's like for 15 months, I stopped breathing," I said. "But when I turned to Jesus, he brought me back to life."

After finishing his 12-month program, Jason worked for five years as a Teen Challenge counsellor. He is currently a student at Florida State University.

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