

Not Just an Adolescent Phase

By Olivia Garrett

Not a phase. Not a teenage rebellion, but a young girl's battle with anorexia nervosa. Her struggle, like millions in the United States with eating disorders, is never ending. When Sarah (name changed) was in 7th grade, her parents first started noticing odd habits.

"She started running on the treadmill a lot, and she stopped eating or would eat only a little bit," John (name changed), her father, said.

She was taken in for an evaluation and immediately admitted to an inpatient program. During her time there, she missed almost all of her 7th grade year and part of 8th. The first stay wasn't enough. She was in and out three different times.

"She couldn't get over the wall," John said. "I knew she hated going back to treatment."

Driving to visit her every weekend, Sarah's parents were exhausted and stressed. One weekend spent driving in an ice storm, another celebrating Christmas in a hotel.

To leave the inpatient center, she needed to get her weight up, become more talkative and learn how to make the right choices in terms of eating and nutrition. The program she was in was primarily female, some struggling from other serious issues plus an eating disorder.

"My daughter had seen more things in 7th grade than most women will see in their lifetime," John said.

At 65-70 pounds during her first stay at the treatment center, she had to focus on getting her weight up. After leaving the first time, she had put on 20 pounds and similar amounts the second and third time.

Once leaving treatment, she returned to school and got back into track, cross country and basketball. She wanted to be a part of something again. The transition wasn't easy. The school wasn't sure how to handle a situation like that and neither did her social worker who lacked experience in the area.

“A lot of students didn't know how to react. Some friends would completely ignore her,” John said.

It became an isolating and private matter for the family. Her father believes it's because “most people don't know how to talk about things like that.”

To this day, Sarah isn't completely cured. Some quirky habits remain. Now a 21-year-old college student, there aren't any signs of reoccurrence, but she isn't open about her struggle.

“She doesn't talk about it very much,” he said. “She's still reflecting.”

John's advice to other parents whose child is battling an eating disorder is to get them into treatment as soon as possible. Signs such as excessive exercise or sudden weight loss should be cause for evaluation.

“It's not the parents or the children's fault,” he said. “It's an insidious disease, and people need to pay attention.”

###

Suggested Graphic: A graph showing the number of people with each eating disorder in the United States.

Suggested Caption: This graph shows the number of people battling each eating disorder in the United States.

