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All the way back Alex Stevenson's road to recovery from drug addiction

By Dave Ruden
Staff Writer

DARIEN -- Alex Stevenson's smile serves as her mood ring, the way for others to measure her emotions. At its fullest, it is a huge joyful expanse that transcends all.

Seeing that full-wattage smile these days is of paramount importance to her family and friends, for it signals that Stevenson's world is properly aligned.

That was not always the case. For much of Stevenson's life, that smile served as a mask, a way to conceal the unhappiness and uncertainty that swirled around like a tidal wave in her mind. No one had any way of knowing, least of all Stevenson. To get on the road to self-discovery, Stevenson had to lose that smile for almost a year.

And go through hell to get it back.

Had everything

Though she always seemed confident and content, Stevenson's childhood was too often an ongoing search for the right path, the road to conforming to, rather than developing, an image. The one area where Stevenson found the most comfort was athletics, where she always starred and earned distinction, where she truly knew she was special.

Her favorite place was on the volleyball court, specifically playing for the Darien High School team. Being part of the state's best program in the sport gave Stevenson an identity, a sense of self-worth she did not always find in other parts of her life.

Laurie LaRusso, the Blue Wave coach, was one of Stevenson's role models. Seeing the look of approval on her coach's face after a successful spike or another victory provided a sense of satisfaction.

Stevenson today has many souvenirs from her four seasons at Darien, three of them as a starter. During her career the team won 100 matches without a loss, including four straight league and state titles.

The mementos that should mean the most were achieved two years ago, when Stevenson was a senior.

"I have medals for both championships, but I have no idea where they are," Stevenson said. "They don't mean anything. I didn't work for them."

Three weeks before that season ended, the night the team had its Senior Day celebration, Stevenson was ticketed for having a bottle of alcohol in her car, although she was exonerated soon afterward.

The incident served as a first domino, unleashing the issues that had been building inside of her. It led to a spiraling descent into cocaine addiction that unhinged Stevenson's life.

What followed was a metaphorical volleyball match, with her life dependent on the outcome, and with her family members and friends serving as Stevenson's passers and setters.

This could easily be a story of tragedy. Instead, because of Stevenson's indomitable spirit and the love of her family, it turned into one of inspiration and redemption.

Sports came first

Alex grew up in Darien as a self-described tomboy, playing every sport available and spending her free time more often with males than females.

"She had a very intense personality," said Alex's mother, Jayme, who is a candidate for selectman in Darien's election on Tuesday. "She excelled in athletics and had a very strong sense of fairness. Though she wanted to be with the in-crowd, she also saw their failings and became friends with kids who were more on the fringe."

Alex, the oldest of five children, had a close relationship with her sister, Sam, who is a year younger. They played sports together and Sam said Alex helped pave a trail that made her experiences easier.

Sam also got more of an insider's view into Alex's middle-school friends.

"They weren't the best; I hung out with them and didn't like them," said Sam, who is currently a freshman and member of the Richmond University lacrosse team. "They were generally nice kids but part of a bad crowd and had done things that Alex hadn't. I didn't think it affected her."

Alex's first three years at Darien High School saw her receive decent but unspectacular grades in the classroom, distinguish herself in volleyball and become one of the FCIAC's best catchers in softball.

"I just was sort of going with the flow," Alex said. "I did not get into trouble, had about a 2.75 grade-point average. I wasn't a great student. I had it in my mind that I wasn't smart, so I wouldn't try at times. I was an underachiever."

Alex said she did what she would consider normal teenage drinking, and was suspended from the volleyball team for two weeks as a sophomore after she was caught with alcohol on a Facebook picture.

Everything was going well for Alex during the fall of her senior year, when what should have been one of the best days of her life turned into a nightmare.

It was a Friday at the end of October and the Blue Wave held their Senior Day festivities during a match against Greenwich, their biggest league rival at the time. Darien won in straight sets, and Alex beamed as LaRusso spoke about her in glowing terms.

That night Stevenson said she went to a birthday party where she wasn't drinking. Stevenson was driving, and unbeknownst to her at the time, a friend had left a bottle of rum in her car.

Sometime around 2 a.m., Alex heard about an impending fight on West Avenue between two people she knew. She said she went to the scene to try and break it up.

"Nothing ended up happening, but the police were called," Alex said. "They searched my car for weapons and found the bottle."

Alex was ticketed for possession of alcohol and picked up by her parents.

CALL FROM POLICE

"As a rule nothing good happens after 12," said Alex's father, John, a municipal bond fund manager. "Alex swore the bottle was not hers."

Darien athletic director John Keleher, who had heard some athletes from the school had been in trouble over the weekend, called the Police Department and learned of the incident involving Alex.

Alex said she was called into a meeting in Keleher's office, where her father and LaRusso were present. She was informed that, due to school policy, she would be removed from the team on the eve of the playoffs.

"I left school after that and I was really upset," Alex said. "I was really depressed. I hadn't done anything. I was crushed. I just went home."

Days later, the person who had placed the bottle in her car came forward and confessed. Alex was cleared and reinstated to the team. But her former teammates did not welcome her back.

"Laurie was clearly on my side, but the team wasn't," Alex said. "I met with all the seniors and they didn't want anything to do with me. Laurie talked to them but they attacked me. She asked them if they wanted me back on the team and they said no. But it was up to coach and she took a risk and put me back on."

As practices resumed, it quickly became evident that the team's chemistry was eroding. And while Alex was despondent inside, LaRusso and Sam, who was also a starter, were thrust into the middle.

"It was really tough, one of the hardest things I've had to go through," Sam said. "We were at practice and all the other girls were talking badly about Alex. We would have meetings and they would get all over her. Hearing them talk like that about my sister was awful. I was in tears every day. The girls would come up to me and said they don't hate me, but Alex is a part of me."

As the situation failed to improve, LaRusso reluctantly removed Alex from the lineup for the playoffs.

"It was really hard," LaRusso said. "I was put between a rock and a hard place. No matter what I did, from the parents' standpoint everything I did was wrong. I care about every kid in my program. They are like my own kids. I had to make the change in the best interest of the team. It was not a punishment but the team was not functioning."

Alex felt like her world was crumbling.

"I didn't say anything, I just worked my butt off in practice, tried to win every sprint," she said. "I cried so much. When the team won the state title and everyone was rejoicing, I couldn't be a part of it. I had thought about quitting. The way it turned out it would have been better for me if I hadn't come back."

Placed under the spotlight, and getting support from only some segments of the Darien volleyball community, became too much.

"The whole thing opened up and allowed judgment to be passed on Alex," John said. "That was very difficult to handle. It hurt her and I know it hurt Jayme and me."

In her view facing few options, Alex turned to the one place where she felt unconditional acceptance.

Alex reconnected with her friends from middle school.

Fall was fast

The fall was swift and hard.

"I started skipping school and getting into drugs," Alex said. "I was doing cocaine and I started hanging with one girl in particular. She was doing cocaine and telling me what it was like, and I was like, fine, I'll try it. It ended up giving me what I needed at that period of time. It made me feel good."

Those around her could see something was wrong with Alex, but didn't realize the extent.

"The first time we suspected something was during Christmas break," John said. "You started seeing tell-tale signs, the reddish nose, the bloodshot eyes. She was uppity, saying she would be home, and then she doesn't come home."

The distance between Alex and Sam started to grow.

"She would always tell me she was going some place but that I couldn't come," Sam said. "I got a really sketchy vibe that she was doing something she shouldn't be. I started hearing rumors that she was doing coke and I freaked out. I confronted her but she denied it."

Alex estimated that during her downfall she paid somewhere between \$7,000 and \$8,000 for drugs, occasionally even stealing money from her parents. She said she used three different dealers and started acting as a chauffeur for one of them in return for free cocaine, driving him into New York City so he could make his purchases.

"If I had to pay for everything, I would say I did anywhere between \$30,000 and \$50,000 worth of drugs," Alex said.

As winter turned to spring, Alex skipped school more frequently, was put on academic probation and started spending fewer nights at home.

Her parents felt helpless trying to help their daughter, talking to a crisis counselor and at one point being advised to let Alex get arrested so she could reach bottom, an option they were not willing to take for her long-term future.

"Initially we were not fully aware of the magnitude of the drug abuse," Jayme said. "You are searching for answers and you don't know what to do. It was like there was nothing that meant anything in her life, and you didn't know how to bring her back from that. I can't even tell you how horrible it was."

One person who tried to reach out to the family was Janice Marzano, the program director at The Depot, a drug- and alcohol-free teen center in Darien that Alex often frequented.

"I've known Alex since the sixth grade," Marzano said. "She was always a complicated person and I always thought she was not as happy as people thought. I saw what was happening to her long before I think her parents even realized. When you are a parent you want to believe in your child. Alex fell hard and she fell fast. I'm really close to her and it made me cry."

Finally, with all avenues exhausted, Jayme and John played the only card they felt they had left short of locking Alex in her room.

They planned an intervention.

TOUGH DAY

May 22, 2008, is forever etched in Alex's mind.

"My father came into my bedroom at 7:30 in the morning and woke me up," she recalled. "I told him to go away that I wanted to sleep. Then a strange lady came into my room and told me to go downstairs, that there were people who wanted to talk to me. It took about an hour for me to go downstairs."

When she did, Alex found a group that included her parents, her paternal grandparents, Sam, Marzano, an aunt and uncle, the intervention leader and a couple of close friends.

Since Alex had turned 18 two months earlier and was a legal adult, the biggest fear Jayme and John had was that she would resist and leave.

"You're terrified," John said. "You are hopeful, but if it doesn't work" "

As part of an intervention, those involved prepare and read a letter to the person they want to seek help.

Hearing her family and friends talk about the person Alex once was served as a reminder of how far she had fallen.

"I had never seen my grandfather or father cry before," Alex said. "They are big manly men who don't like to show emotion. Seeing them cry is what I will remember most."

While most outsiders have the perception of interventions as adversarial, Jayme said Alex's was quite different.

"It was very, very powerful," she said. "This one was very loving. It was like a gift, like living through your own eulogy. You get all these people standing up and saying how amazing you are."

Alex was literally taken out the door and put on a plane to Utah, headed for the Open Sky Wilderness Therapy program that Jayme and John had selected for the first phase of her rehabilitation.

"I couldn't go back upstairs to get anything, no cell phone," Alex said. "It was just the intervention leader and me. And when they told me I was going to Utah, I was like, you couldn't pick any place closer?"

As Alex walked out the front door, there was a palpable sense of relief.

"It was one more night where we didn't have to worry about what the next day would bring," Jayme said. "If it would be the end of her."

ROAD BACK

Jayme and John, with the help of a consultant from Deliberate Directions in Darien, which assisted in the planning of the intervention and Alex's rehabilitation program, selected Open Sky, based in Durango, Colo., which operates camps both there and in Utah.

Open Sky, which has programs for teens 13-17 and adults 18-28, uses a holistic wilderness approach, believing that nature is the ideal place for people to heal, grow and learn.

"We had read all the information on Open Sky and talked to two people there, and of the three places we looked at it was the most well-rounded and all-encompassing," John said.

Alex said she arrived, was fitted with clothes and immediately went out on her first hike with a group of eight people in a rainstorm.

"I was like, Why me?" Alex said. "We walked about four or five miles. The first two to three weeks I don't remember well, but I wasn't too happy. I thought I was in a dream. I didn't think it was real. Then things started to change. After I got to know my therapist, all the people in the group and the group leaders, I started to appreciate it and actually participated. To my surprise I got a lot out of it."

Besides hiking, there was yoga, meditation, camping and everyone was assigned chores. And many of the qualities Alex thought she possessed started to come out.

"I think it taught me how to be a leader," Alex said. "Anyone in the same situation as me is basically a follower."

During her 10 weeks at Open Sky, Alex was allowed to communicate with her family only by letter, except for one 20-minute phone conversation. Alex's correspondences detailed her entire ordeal.

"About the only thing that gave me some comfort was that she didn't use her body for drugs," John said. "At least she still had that self-respect."

Jayme and John were able to find pictures of Alex on the Open Sky Web site. Eventually, they were encouraged to see Alex's smile return.

"We entered our own therapeutic activities," Jayme said. "We needed time away from her to heal as a family. You could see the physical transformation and that she was happy."

As her graduation day neared, there was great anticipation as the Stevensons prepared to reunite.

"The real improvement and growth came in the last month, and the last three weeks really shot up," John said.

"Alex had a total grasp, and wanted to live a healthy life and help people. She became a leader of her group. It was so opposite of what she went there like."

Alex's family came out for her graduation and spent a five-day vacation together.

"My parents saw me for the first time and I was like a totally different person," Alex said. "It was probably the best five days we've ever had together. We all got along. We'd been through so much and everyone was so glad it was over. We all felt we had accomplished so much."

Alex then spent four months at the NorthStar Center in Oregon for her after-care program.

On Dec. 11, 203 days after being whisked out of her house in a disconsolate state, Alex returned home a changed person.

"It was amazing," she said. "The best feeling ever. Everything was great. I couldn't have asked for anything better."

Alex spent Christmas with her family and in January started taking classes at Fairfield University. She officially enrolled there this fall, after completing a final English paper last spring to complete her requirements at Darien High School.

On May 23, with the help of Ellen Dunn, Darien's assistant principal and one of the few administrators at the school who had extended her a hand when she most needed it, Alex had a private graduation ceremony in the library with her family, friends, LaRusso and a few teachers. "It meant a lot to me," Alex said. "I probably had the best graduation than anyone had in my grade."

BACK HOME

Alex returned last spring to the court that had provided some of her highest and lowest moments, as a volunteer assistant to LaRusso coaching Darien's boys volleyball team.

"She could be a very good coach, and I don't think it is limited to volleyball," LaRusso said. "She's a dynamic kid with a great personality and a lot to give."

Unlike two years ago, when she felt isolated and trapped in a corner, Alex's life is now full of options. She is no longer the high school sophomore who dyed her hair blonde to try and fit in.

Alex, now 19, is a solid B student majoring in psychology at Fairfield, though she has applied to the University of Vermont for the second semester because it has an outdoor program somewhat similar to what she experienced at Open Sky. She still spends a lot of time on the volleyball court, playing on Fairfield's club team."

Alex is now very much in tune with the outdoors. It was her path back to finding that smile, and she in turn would like to give back and try to help others.

"I'm a lot more mature now," Alex said. "I could see myself being a counselor or something like that one day. I know I am focused more on my goals than partying now."

While Alex was fortunate to have a family with the financial means to get her the best care, equally important was the emotional foundation provided.

"I'd be in serious trouble if I didn't have the family I have," she said. "They have been the biggest support system ever."

There are a lot of people out there not as fortunate. While the perception may be it can't happen here, Marzano said what happened to Alex is not an isolated case, even in affluent communities like Darien.

"There are a lot of Alexes out there," she said. "A lot of that has to do with the parents. Alex got a second chance because her parents cut the denial. A lot of parents are in denial and want their kids to be the popular one. There are more Alexes than people realize or want to recognize." Is there a fear that Alex could suffer a relapse?

"You don't ever want to think that she or we have beaten it or are ever bigger than it," John said. "That thought leads to potential problems. We feel like we've made big strides."

Alex has severed ties with much of her past. She said there is nothing productive looking at the world through a rear-view mirror.

"I'm moving forward," she said. "I made a lot of bad decisions. I'm just ready for new experiences, new friends, new beginnings."

Dave Ruden can be reached at dave.ruden@scni.com. Read his blog at <http://blog.ctnews.com/overtime/> and follow him on Twitter at DaveRuden
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