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THE WHITE HOUSE
OFFICE OF THE FIRST LADY'S PRESS SECRETARY

MRS. REAGAN'S REMARKS
LIONS INTERNATIONAL
SAN FRANCISCO - JULY 5, 1984

Thank you so much. I'm very touched and pleased by this award -- though I must say that in your company I feel unduly singled out for recognition. The Lions Clubs have been so resourceful and dedicated to the struggle against drug and alcohol abuse that each and every one of you deserves not only an award but a standing ovation.

When you think of a child, what leaps to mind? For those of us who are parents, the answer comes easily. We don't immediately think of the sleepless nights, the untidy closets, or the bedtime squabbles. What leaps to mind is the sweetness of a smile; clear young eyes dancing with mischief and mirth, and perhaps most of all, the bright promise of the future. It's not just that we want to see our own hopes and dreams for the future embodied in our children -- we also want the future to be productive for them; to fulfill their dearest hopes and aspirations.

The gaze of a happy, healthy child is almost always upward. They look at their world with a delightful expectancy. The eyes of a young drug abuser, by contrast, are downcast and hooded. The world weighs heavily on their narrow shoulders.

Many people still think that substance abuse is something that happens only to other families. But when you actually talk to the children involved in drugs as I have done over the past

several years, harsh reality shatters that image. The truth is that drugs and alcohol are everywhere available and everywhere abused. There is no race which is immune, no region, no age group, no socio-economic class. A physician reported last year that "nobody in the United States is more than a handshake away from virtually any drug they want to get." And he continued, "Drugs are used by every stratum, across the board, from blue collar people to professionals."

It's clear then that this is a very democratic problem. It respects no boundaries. None of us can deny that we are all affected. And when one member of a family becomes caught in the cycle of addiction, it's like a whirlpool which drags the rest of the family down as well. Let me share a letter with you -- a cry from the heart recently written by the mother of an addict to her local newspaper:

"I really wish more people would be made to know how much suffering and misery families go through when drugs are being taken by one member of the family.

"Thank God our daughter is recovering now and on the right road. But there were days where we could not handle her and had to call the police to our house.

"The worry and sleepless nights we had, the tears we shed.

"Sweet sixteen was the most bitter time in our lives. The memories of her in the hospital -- a mental hospital and later another hospital for hepatitis...she was so beautiful, talented and loved. She became a helpless vegetable for a long time."

"Without our devotion, love, and plenty of patience and time, she would not be here now.

"I am writing this letter and crying at the same time. Those memories will never be forgotten."

The key word in that letter is patience -- without plenty of patience her daughter might not have made it.

So many of the skills needed to combat drug abuse require organization, and energy, and activity. And we have seen these in abundance. One of the things which has struck me in my travels around the country is the intensity and dedication of parents banding together to combat this problem. Only three years ago, for example, there were 1,000 parent groups organized to fight for drug-free youth. Today there are over 4,000! That should give us all reason to hope.

Still, we can't afford to lose sight of the fact that there is a great deal of work to do and it's easy to get discouraged and frustrated. That's where the patience I spoke of becomes the saving grace.

Sometimes, even the best efforts can be disappointing in the beginning.

I heard recently of a community that started a drug and alcohol program in its junior high schools. They had slide presentations, discussion groups, parent involvement, and peer counseling. It seemed they had all the ingredients for success.

Yet, one year later, parents and teachers agreed there was very little progress. Frustrated, they talked with parents in

neighboring communities. They learned they were not doing too little -- but rather were too late! Drug education and parent involvement must begin during the earliest years of elementary school.

The harsh fact is that children must be taught about the dangers of drugs at the same time they are learning to read and write -- otherwise it may be too late.

That town showed the patience and persistence this struggle demands. After a year of frustration, they looked for new approaches, and found them. That kind of strength is a godsend because if you save just one life, it's all worth it.

I want to congratulate you on your "Skills for Adolescence" program. This is exactly the kind of involvement that fills me with so much hope about our children's future. It will focus directly on the areas where young teens are most vulnerable and where drugs usually establish their first beachhead: self-confidence, peer relationships, and family communication.

In a sense, this is attacking the drug problem on its own home turf. Just as a virus will always attack the weakest organ in a body, drug abuse seems to thrive on weakness of the soul.

Drugs seem to offer easy answers to kids. They seem to supply self-esteem and maturity. But of course, it's an illusion. That's why it's so important for parents to become more involved with their children's lives. They have to be aware of what their children are doing, who they're seeing, where they're going.

This is where the parents groups are so wonderful -- they help support each other.

Nor should they fear that if they launch a frontal attack on drugs, they'll be seen as "square." Our ability to influence what's "in" and "cool" for kids is one of our most overlooked weapons in this war. After all, one of the main reasons children turn to drugs is to feel more grown-up.

I think we have made some progress with pot smoking -- though I'd like more to be made of course. Recent information shows that marijuana smoking among high school seniors is at its lowest rate since figures were first compiled in 1975. The researchers who conducted the study pointed out that the decrease in use has been accompanied by a growing awareness of the harmfulness of the drug. And they went on to speculate that the health and fitness trend of the past several years may have contributed to making pot smoking less "cool."

It may sometimes seem to the parents of teenagers that anything they are for, their kids will be against. But we must remember that much of that is just confusion. Teenagers want and need a great deal of approval -- the kind of approval that only a parent can bestow. That influence should not be underestimated.

-- Well, I seem to have given parents a tall order, haven't I? They must be resourceful, and they must be alert and involved and also dispense large helpings of parental approval. It is a great deal to ask -- but it's not too much. I know because the Lions Clubs are doing so much of it already. Together we will keep those young eyes from losing their promise.

-- Thank you and God bless you.