

High and dry

Boozing, smoking, dabbling with drugs – for most of us, it’s all just part of our teenage rebellion. But what about the school kids who develop dangerous addictions? Well, in the States they’re packed off to Sobriety High...

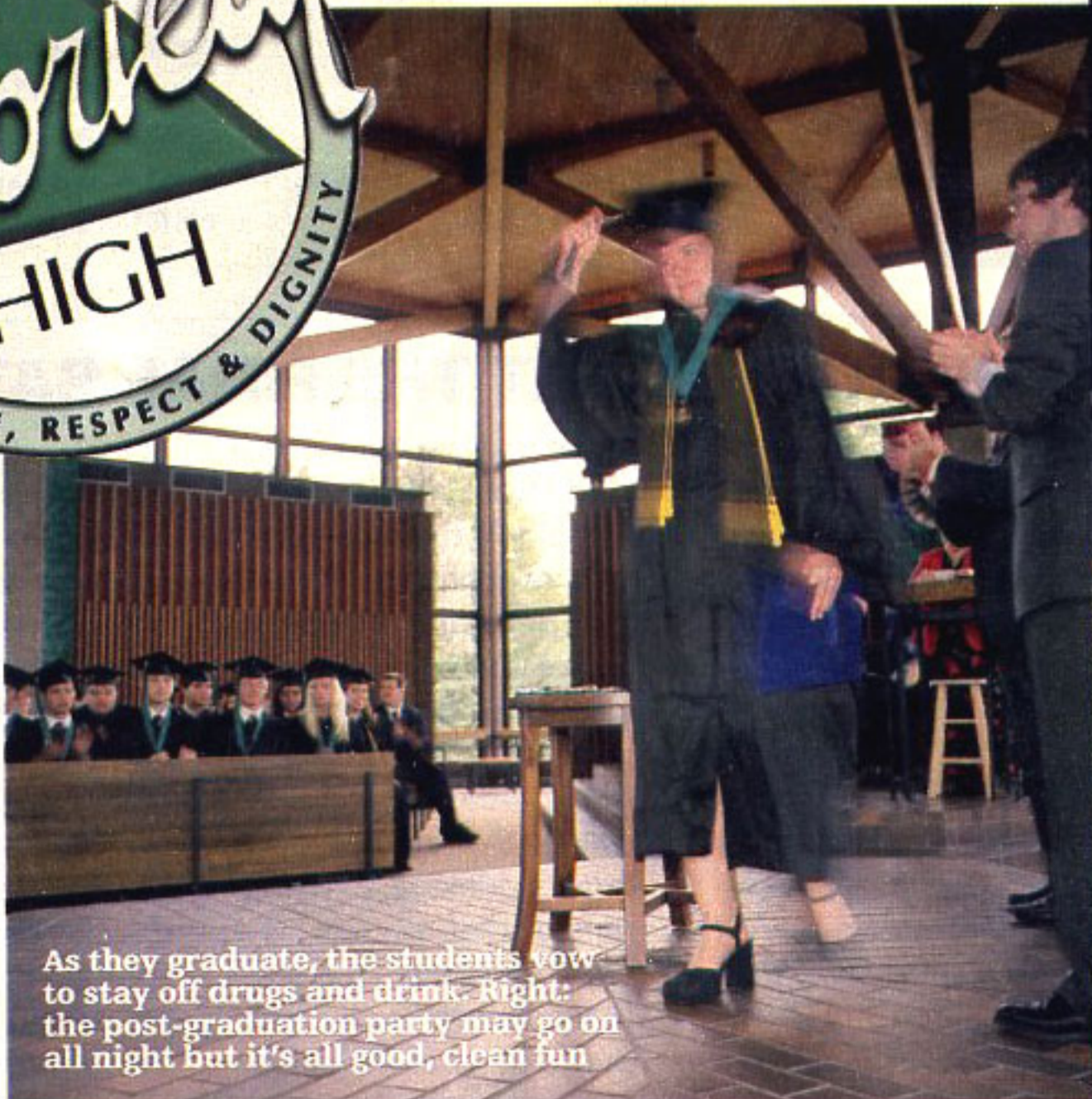
On a bright July evening in suburban Minneapolis, USA, a group of high school students gather for graduation. Dressed in black gowns and caps, they congregate outside the nearby chapel, making last-minute adjustments to their formal attire. More used to Doc Martin boots, baseball caps and designer T-shirts, some look uncomfortable, nervously finger-cracking while swigging Diet Coke or Dr Pepper. Others drag on Marlboro Lights before casting away their half-smoked cigarettes and grinding them into the ground. ‘Will anyone who wants to smoke do so outside the chapel grounds,’ shouts the high school principal. ‘There are butts everywhere.’ But smoking is only one of these students’ vices. Once labelled pot heads, coke addicts, albies or junkies, these are graduates with a difference. Each at some time in their teenage lives has been diagnosed as chemically dependent. They are all addicts about to graduate

Where alcoholic kids go to school

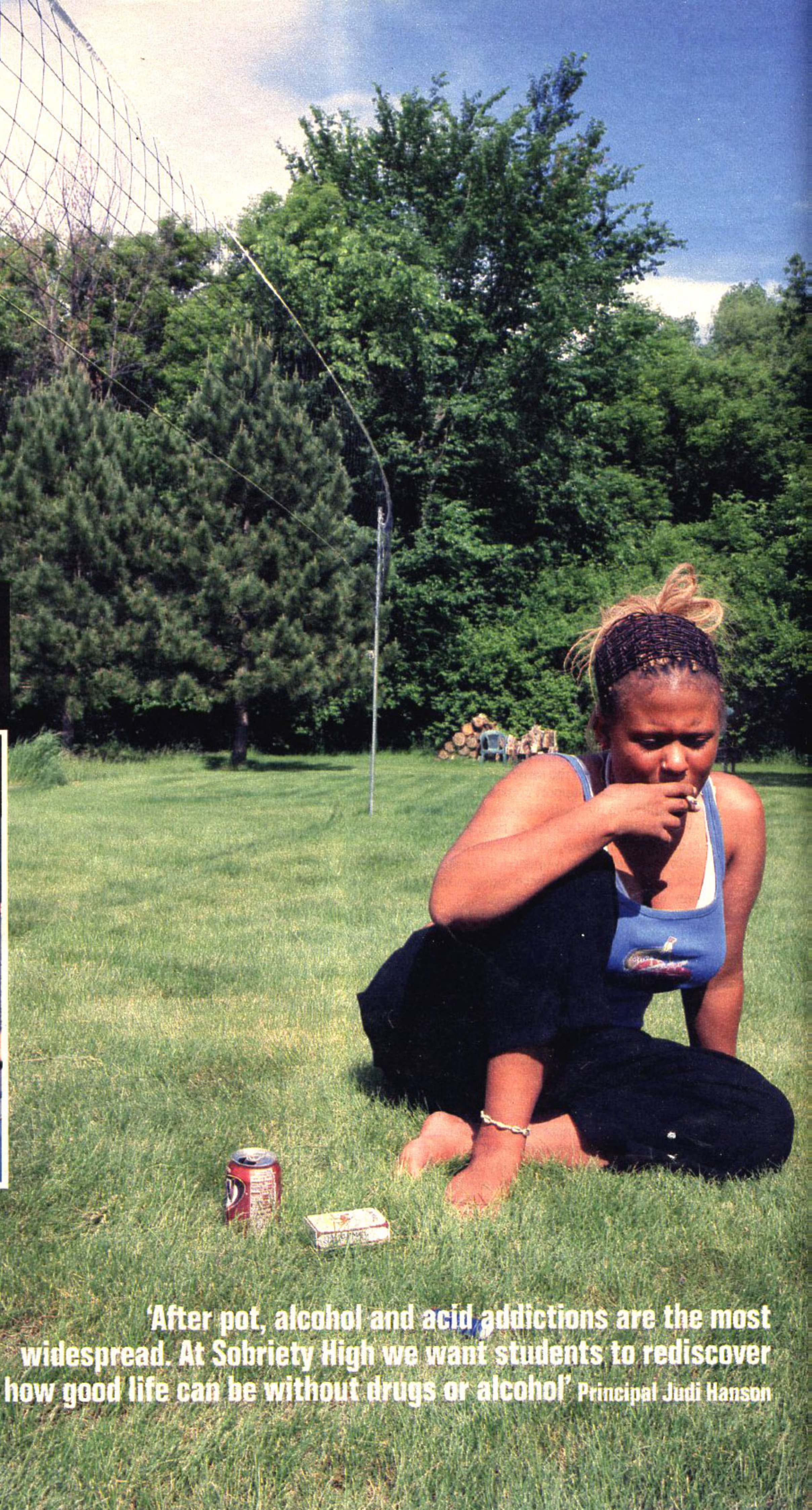
from Sobriety High – one of America’s 17 recovery schools. Megan Kochendorfer, 17, has one last drag on a Camel before dashing into the chapel. She enrolled at Sobriety High just six months earlier. After trying her first hit of amphetamine (speed) at 15, she spiralled into addiction. ‘I used to take everything,’ she says. From a single-parent family, Megan felt she never fitted in at high school. ‘I couldn’t

afford the designer clothes other students wore so they’d bully me. I used drugs to try to boost my confidence and fit in. Anyone who was anyone was using speed at school. It was easily available.’ Founded in 1991, Sobriety High is now in its 12th year. Students, aged between 14 and 18, can enrol at any time in the school year. The only criteria for admission is that they’ve completed 30 days’ treatment for their addiction and that they want to stay sober and will sign a ‘sobriety contract’ promising to do so. Frequent relapses lead to expulsion.

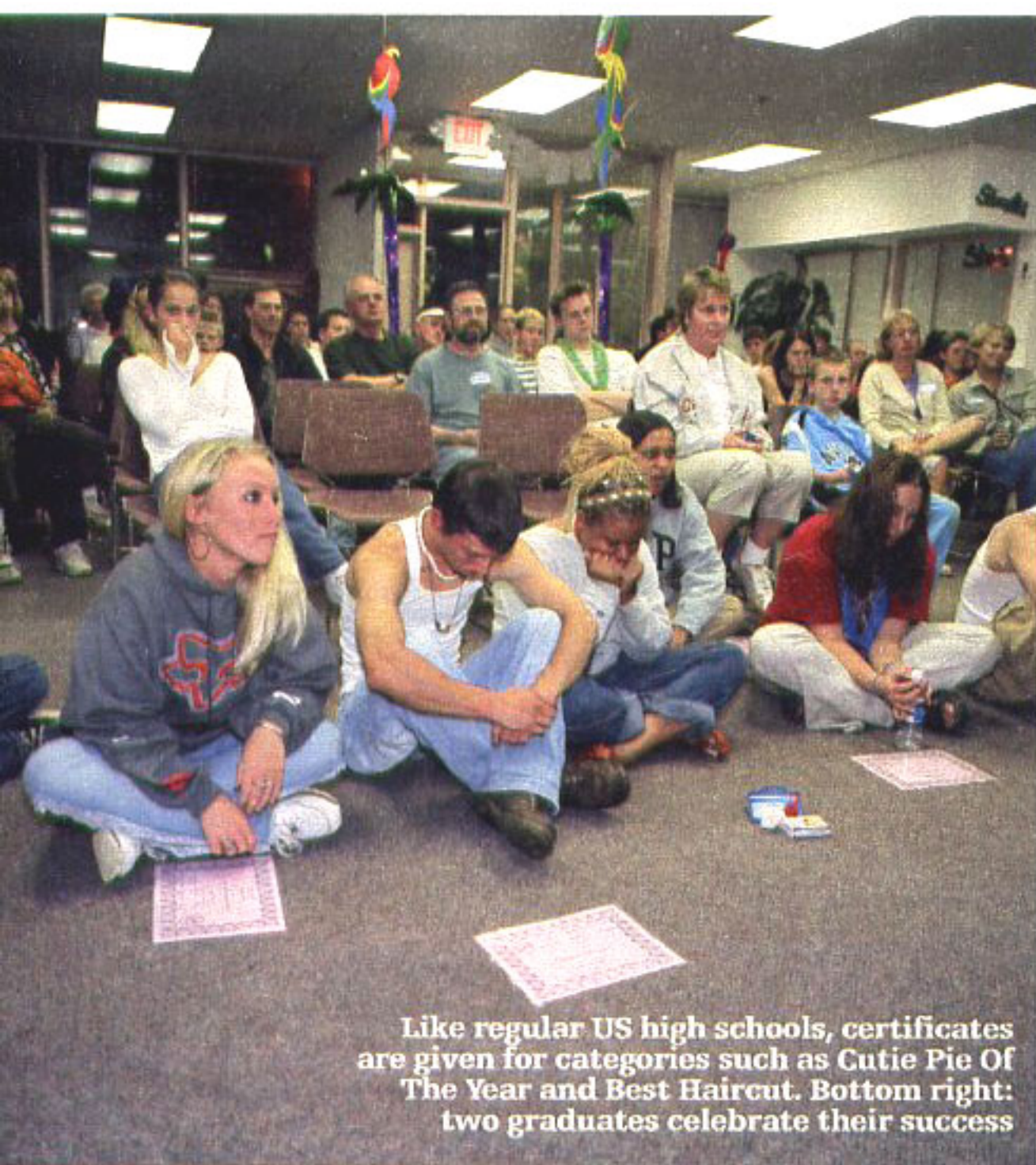
‘Pot is the most common addiction,’ says principal Judi Hanson, 59. ‘It’s psychologically addictive and makes people lose their ambition. It’s very common in schools, though not everyone gets addicted. After pot, alcohol and acid addictions are the most widespread. At Sobriety High we want students to rediscover how good life can be without drugs or alcohol.’ Of the 12 staff at the school, only two are former addicts. But all



As they graduate, the students vow to stay off drugs and drink. Right: the post-graduation party may go on all night but it's all good, clean fun



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Like regular US high schools, certificates are given for categories such as Cutie Pie Of The Year and Best Haircut. Bottom right: two graduates celebrate their success

are employed for their ability to listen and not judge people for their addiction, and all are on first-name terms with the pupils. The school curriculum is much the same as in any high school. The main support comes from peer counselling in the 'Self-Respect 101' class. 'We sit down together for an hour a day as a group,' explains Judi, who has worked at Sobriety High since it opened. 'The students talk about what they've been through and how they feel about life and the future. 'Some are from disadvantaged backgrounds – either bullied or abused as children. Equally though, some are from stable, wealthy homes. Addiction doesn't discriminate. But knowing they're not alone helps pupils stay clean.' Sobriety High, a charitable, non-profit organisation is one of 17 'sober schools' in the USA, catering for over 1,000 students – 11 of these are in Minnesota, with two more opening next year. The state is known as the 'Land of Lakes' but also unofficially as the 'State of Sobriety'. Progressive government departments have led to specialist treatment and centres for both teenage and adult addicts. Many of the 80 students at Sobriety have been referred by Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotic Anonymous (NA) meetings. Some 70% of teenagers in America have tried drugs and, of those, 10% get addicted, according to figures. Peer counselling at Sobriety High has also led

to romance. Dressed in a flowing purple dress, diminutive Sarah Ludke, 17, still has another year before she graduates. An alcoholic, she's come to graduation to cheer on her towering 6ft 5in boyfriend Kyle Hebrandson, 19. 'We met at an AA meeting,' explains Sarah. 'After three months he came round my house and we watched a movie together. Afterwards I said: "So do you want to go out together then?" We've been together ever since.' Love, it would seem, has helped them both stay clean. 'We tell each other everything and understand each other totally because we have both been through similar things,' says Kyle. Sarah started drinking aged seven, at first stealing alcohol from her parents. By the age of 13 she was putting away a litre of vodka a day. 'I hid it well,' she says. 'I was so used to it I didn't appear drunk and I'd disguise the smell with perfume and gum. I had loving parents, a stable home and no real problems – I just loved alcohol and the way it made me feel. I planned my whole life around it. I even decided to work in a bar so I'd be around drink. 'I'd hang out with older boys who'd get me drunk. I was molested a few times but I hardly knew what was happening – I was almost unconscious and couldn't stop them. Eventually I started to suffer from depression. Mum took me to a psychiatrist and that's when the truth came out. She'd been worrying about my mood swings but hadn't realised how much I was drinking. She was horrified.' Kyle, the son of a government microbiologist, has had similar traumas. 'I did everything I could get my hands on,' he says. 'Pot, acid, speed. I started doing it for fun. I wasn't using drugs to escape problems – it was a pure physical addiction. I didn't care if I woke up the next day as long as I'd had a good time.' Some adult members of AA and NA sponsor students through their studies as the schools are largely dependant on donations from parents, local organisations and companies. For each student, the school's motto of 'Education With Love, Respect And Dignity' costs around \$12,000 a year. Parents try and help out, but most of it has to be raised. Nathan Blixrud, 18, has been sober for two years and ten months since joining Sobriety High. For Nathan, the combination of pot and speed led to a near breakdown. 'I'd been smoking pot since I was 12,' says Nathan. 'I loved getting high. I was dealing at school at 13. If I didn't have any pot, I'd take crack or speed. It was easily available. 'I thought I saw things other people didn't. One day I told Dad I was Jesus. He thought I was joking. Eventually, I put a gun to my head. Mum and Dad found me and called the cops.'

It's tradition at Sobriety High that students and teachers party till dawn at the end of the school year, perhaps as a test of their mettle. All-night parties they may be, but soft drinks, a hot tub, a pig roast and disco are the only stimulation. As the graduation ceremony begins, students, parents and teachers take their places in the chapel. Desiray Warner, 17, climbs on to the back of the bench at the rear of the chapel. 'Have you seen the hickeys on her neck?' whispers a female student nearby. 'She's seeing Nathan!' she adds. 'I told you.' However, romance isn't encouraged between students at Sobriety High. 'We're supposed to concentrate on ourselves first,' explains Nathan. 'But like any school, there's plenty of sexual activity,' he adds knowingly. One by one, each of the 30 graduating students in the Class of 2003 is called up to collect their diploma. Each name is followed by the exact length of time to the day they have been free from drink and drugs. Dave Ettesvold, a drugs counsellor at a mainstream high school in nearby St Paul, has much praise for Sobriety High. 'I see 200 kids a year involved with drugs,' says Dave, himself a former pot addict. 'In mainstream schools, 90% go back to using. They mix with the same old friends, hang out in the same old places, and don't escape it. It takes a lot to stay sober and being with other students who are in the same boat really helps.' Of the students collecting their diplomas, some will go on to look for work, some are off to college, others haven't yet made plans. But all vow to stay off drugs. 'It's moving to see them graduate,' says Linda Teppo, 55, principal of the campus's east wing. 'You get to know them intimately because of what they've been through. You're there for them 24/7. It's emotionally and physically exhausting. 'We lost 20 students this year who relapsed. Relapsers are allowed to return, but a lot don't. It's sad but there's nothing you can do. They have to want to stay clean and maybe their time hasn't come. At least once they have been through Sobriety High, they can carry with them what they learn here for the rest of their lives. It gives them hope.'



Text by Chris Morris. Photographs by Robbie Cooper

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