



From left Keneila Gresham, a student at William J Ostiguy who was addicted to crack by the age of 17; one of the classrooms; Sophia Mercado, who was 'never at [mainstream] school sober'



The straight AA students

Welcome to Boston's pioneering William J Ostiguy High School for teenage alcoholics and addicts, where 12-step recovery is on the timetable and the students learn to live clean and sober. By *Jane Mulkerrins*

Photographs by **Claire Beckett**

Sophia Mercado started drinking and smoking marijuana as soon as she hit her teens. "My parents always had liquor around the house and at 13 I got caught smuggling alcohol to school in a water bottle," she recalls. By 15, she was "never at school sober" and was taking opiate-based prescription drugs. "I would wake up in the morning and the first thing I'd do would be smoke weed or pop some pills," she says, fiddling with the zip on her tracksuit.

Sophia, now 18, moved to the Boston area from New York with her family three years ago. "My mum thought

a geographical change would be good for us, and for me," she says with a shrug.

Life at home had been neither stable nor sober. Her stepfather was arrested and deported for selling heroin, and Sophia began funding her escalating drug use with theft. "I would steal from my nieces and nephews, as well as my mother and my sister," she admits. She attended a two-month treatment programme, followed by a spell in a residential rehab centre but relapsed. Now, after a third spell in detox, Sophia has been sober for the longest stretch in more than three years. She credits

her sustained sobriety not to the various treatment programmes she has undergone, but to the school she now attends: William J Ostiguy High School for teenage substance abusers, a publicly funded "Recovery School" in Boston, Massachusetts.

Taking up four floors of a former office building in downtown Boston, Ostiguy neither looks nor feels much like an ordinary high school. On one wall in a small communal area on the third floor is a large, hand-drawn poster outlining the Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step credo. The 30 students aged

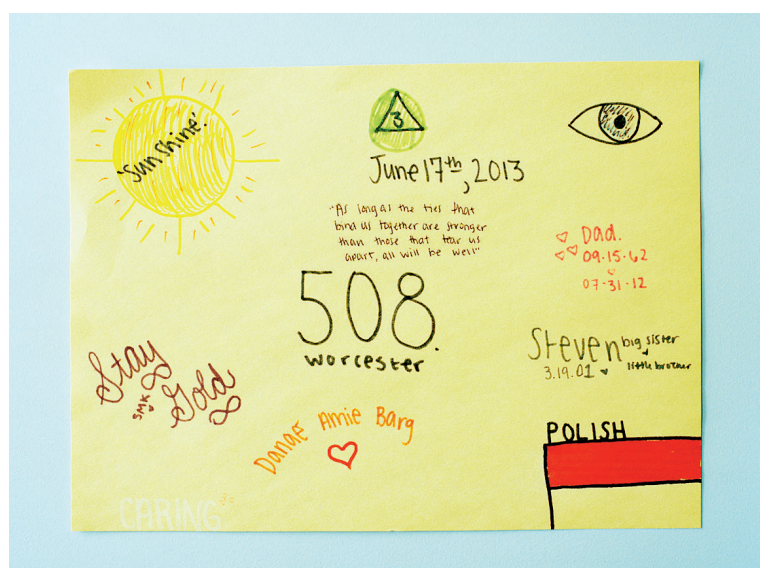


between 14 and 18 (they can attend, and receive a high-school diploma, up to the age of 21) address the staff by their first names. During break on the morning I visit the conversation between the students touches on topics including sponsors and the nearest Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meetings.

The atmosphere among the 10 or so students in each class, however, is notably concentrated and quiet. "We try to keep everything calm, ordered and predictable," Roger Oser, the school's principal, tells me. "They need structure and consistency, because they don't have any in the rest of their lives." Determinedly hands-on, Oser is a wry,

year. It is one of 35 "sobriety" or "recovery" high schools in America. Ostiguy's intake is largely blue-collar, from across the state of Massachusetts, and the patterns of problems that it addresses have changed dramatically in the past decade, according to Oser. "Marijuana use in the US is at an all-time high, while the perception of

Below The school curriculum has a strong therapeutic focus.
Right Brendan Griffin, 17, who would drink spirits in the shower each morning before school



gentle-mannered former youth worker who arrives at the school before 7am every day in order that he can stand outside and bid good morning to each of his charges. "No one has probably said it to them today yet," he reasons.

On average, before joining Ostiguy, a third of students will have abused heroin, about half prescription drugs, and 80 per cent multiple drugs, including cocaine, "Molly" (a form of ecstasy) and new, synthetic versions of street drugs, as well as alcohol and marijuana. Most of them will have done so from the age of 12 or 13.

Funded by Boston Public Schools, the local education authority, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and The Gavin Foundation, a local substance-abuse treatment agency, the school is now in its ninth

the risk it carries is at an all-time low, because of legalisation," he says. "We try to teach the students that, OK, you are not going to overdose on marijuana the same way that you are on heroin, but it will severely impact your abilities to do well in school and in life. And it

that is in many of the students' homes – 75 per cent come from families in which substance abuse already exists.

There are exceptions, however, such as 17-year-old Brendan Griffin. "If you had met me a year ago, I wasn't the same person," he tells me. Handsome, bright

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is a gateway drug for many of them." Recently the sharpest rise has been in prescription-drug abuse, particularly opiate-based painkillers, such as OxyContin. "It's an access issue: these drugs are in their homes," says Oser (50 per cent of Americans regularly use prescription drugs).

and from a middle-class family with no history of addiction, Brendan began drinking, smoking marijuana and using prescription drugs at 14. His use escalated rapidly – funded by robbery – until soon he was drinking spirits in the shower each morning. "I was constantly intoxicated," he says. "In my junior

(penultimate) year of high school, I failed everything in my first term. I gave up on school and just started using even more.”

Brendan and his parents sought out the school for themselves, but the majority of students are referred by detox and drug-treatment centres or the court system. The one entrance criterion is that they must have been clean for 30 days when they arrive. There is a rolling intake, meaning that students arrive at any time throughout the school year (four new students are due to start on the Monday after my visit) and, unfortunately, leave too, for further treatment programmes. They remain enrolled at their home high school, where they can return at any point, though most have no desire to.

“At my old school the teachers just brushed me off to the side because I was a drug addict,”

Andrew McCall, 18, tells me with a shrug. At 13, he began injecting heroin, and later served time on remand for assault with a deadly weapon. “They assumed I wasn’t going anywhere, so wouldn’t waste their time and energy on me.” He’s been at Ostiguy since he was 16 and is on course to graduate next summer. “I never thought I could get through 24 hours without drugs, let alone 24 months,” he says, earnestly.

Scheduled into every day’s timetable are group meetings and counselling sessions, and at any time students can seek out one of the three counsellors – or other members of staff – to talk to. Ostiguy encourages its students to attend AA and NA group meetings outside school hours too. “Keeping them busy is vital,” says John McCarthy, a drily humorous former boxer and now Ostiguy’s recovery counsellor, who co-ordinates the therapeutic aspects of the school’s mission and who is clearly adored by all the students. The extensive counselling and therapy that most willingly received is evident in the fluency and ease with which

the students talk about being “in recovery”, the school’s watchword. “Sobriety is a physical state; recovery is a way of life,” says McCarthy.

Not every student is yet on board with the extra-curricular psychosocial and emotional activities. “I hate going to meetings,” says Solci Cruz, 16, who started at Ostiguy a month ago. She rolls



Above **Andrew McCall** started injecting heroin at the age of 13. ‘I never thought I could get through 24 hours without drugs, let alone 24 months,’ he says now. Right **Danae Barg**, 19



her eyes, pouts and fiddles with her giant hoop earrings. “They don’t understand where I’m coming from,” she laments.

Roger Oser believes the peer support that Ostiguy fosters is key to sustained recovery. “In their regular schools, their homes and communities, drugs

Keneila Gresham, a sparky, petite tomboy who graduated from Ostiguy in the summer. She had been smoking marijuana since the age of 13 and was addicted to crack cocaine by the time she was 17. “There was a solid group of people here who were all trying to do the right thing, so it was a lot easier for me to finish school and not do

anything stupid.” Now 21 and clean for three years, she glows with optimism and is applying to train as a paramedic. “This place kept me sane,” she says.

But Danae Barg, 19, a lively, fizzy force who graduated last summer and has been clean for over a year, after years

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and alcohol are running rampant, and they are given the wrong messages from all sides,” he says. “They need to identify with each other, support one another and take the lead from their peers.” Many of the students agree with him. “I had people here who understood me, that I could talk to all the time,” says

of drug abuse, disagrees. “Most of my peers didn’t really help me,” she says, ruefully of her time at Ostiguy. “A lot were still getting high. That was really hard, when I was focused in my sobriety, and others were not.”

Oser tells me that the school does not tolerate drugs or alcohol whatsoever, and

holds weekly random drug tests. If a student fails a drugs test, the school addresses the problem head-on with them and their family, and re-evaluates the “recovery plan” agreed on arrival. In cases of serious or repeated relapse the school may advise a student to return to a drug-treatment programme.

Everyone I speak to admits that relapse rates are high. The Friday before my visit, Oser tell me, three out of five students tested positive for drugs. All three are still in school, however. Rather than being viewed as a failure, relapses are seen as part of the recovery process at Ostiguy. Reid Westhaver, 16, attended Ostiguy for eight months before he relapsed in the summer and began using marijuana and prescription opioids again. “When I was here last time, I didn’t really listen. I thought it was all bull—. I was still getting high but getting away with it,” he freely admits, running his hand through his close-cropped hair. After a two-month drug-binge, he entered a three-week detox programme in late August, on his 16th birthday. “I think I got it this time,” he says with a smile. “Now I know they want to help us to recover, they want us to do the right thing, and they are willing to help us in that.”

Ostiguy is named after a local firefighter who was horrified that Boston teenagers who needed to go to sobriety school had to travel to Minnesota – the first state to establish one, 25 years ago – and lobbied the local government to follow its example. Massachusetts, which has four such schools, has good forward-thinking, state-funded healthcare – as well as a dark history of addiction. “As the saying in South Boston goes, there’s a bar and an AA meeting on every corner,” says Oser. Texas, while generally more conservative in its state policies, has six recovery schools, thanks to a strong network of local and parental support.

There is now also a nationwide Association of Recovery Schools, and legislation passing through Congress to help establish a national framework.

For the four teachers, two guidance counsellors, one recovery counsellor and numerous support staff at Ostiguy there are, of course, specific challenges to working at a recovery school. There

Below Reid Westhaver, entered a detox programme on his 16th birthday. Right Solci Cruz, also 16



are vast gaps in many of the students’ education, half of them have special educational needs, and 75 per cent have diagnosed mental-health issues (some pre-existing, but many created, or exacerbated, by drug use). “True success can be hard to measure here,” admits

this window of feeling that they are capable, and that they can make progress in their lives,” she says.

“In a regular high school, the spring of their junior year, they are having conversations about where they are going to apply to college,” says Joelle Bush, one of the school’s two guidance counsellors, who deals with the logistical

riddle of organising the academic life of students from different schools across the state. “But we have kids who are following AA, which is the one-day-at-a-time model. So how do you marry long-term planning with being in the moment?” she asks, rhetorically.

‘In their regular schools, their homes and communities, drugs and alcohol are running rampant, and they’re given the wrong messages from all sides’

Amanda Hathaway, who has taught maths at Ostiguy for eight years. “But they get a lot of individual attention and many say they never did well at school, until they came here.”

Even if a student relapses and never returns, Hathaway believes it is far from a failure. “At least they have had

On a wall in the office she shares with Joel Menasha, a fellow counsellor, are photographs of graduates from previous years. “It serves as a reminder that we got these kids to the finish line,” Menasha says. “They have earned their diploma and, whatever happens later, no one can ever take that away from them.” ●