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

MRS. REAGAN'S REMARKS
PTA NATIONAL CONVENTION
LAS VEGAS, NEVADA - JUNE 20, 1984

Good morning. It's wonderful to be with you again. You know, when I look out at all of you, I see power. Parents and teachers together can be an overwhelming force for good in the lives of children if they have the wisdom and the will. And I thank God for that power because our children need it so desperately.

They need it because the threat that stalks them is so frightfully potent in its own right. Cocaine. PCP. Marijuana. Alcohol. Speed. These are the enemies of our children. They are cunning, and treacherous, and oh so very patient. As one former teenage alcoholic put it, "Alcohol will wait forever. It's always going to be there." That may be true, but with your help, so will we!

We must be there for our children from the earliest ages, because as you know so well, the enemy shows no mercy. It still sends a chill through me to recall a visit I made some time ago to an elementary school in Atlanta. I asked a class of third graders how many had been offered drugs. Almost every hand went up!

This wasn't an isolated case. Across the country, eight and nine-year-olds are being forced to confront decisions which are just heartbreaking to think about. The image of a ten-year-old drug user -- it's just not something you get used to. But while we'll never get used to it, we are learning how to combat it.

When I first became involved in this battle, I realized how ill-prepared we parents had been to deal with the problem of substance abuse. As parents, we had been ready to face measles and mumps, falls and scrapes, sibling rivalry, and Little League losses. But the danger of dependence on chemicals and the corresponding destruction of young lives caught us unawares. In some cases, tragically so. I'd like to share with you the true experience of a California family I will call the Martins.

Marianne and Gene Martin noticed a change in their 14-year-old son, Paul, during the summer before he started high school in 1977. Paul had always been outgoing and cheerful, and he suddenly began to withdraw. He lost interest in his hobbies. And by December, he had dropped all of his old friends and was becoming more and more hostile. He began to lose weight, and then to lose sleep.

Gene and Marianne knew that their son dabbled in marijuana and beer, but as Gene said, "We were ignorant enough to think, 'Thank God it's only pot and beer.'" The year dragged on and Paul didn't improve. Instead, his mood swings became even more pronounced. He would cry uncontrollably. His worried parents

consulted a school counselor. The counselor advised them not to fret, saying, "a little pot isn't all that damaging."

The Martins reluctantly took this advice and for some short time Paul seemed to be doing a little better. On the evening of April 5, 1978, Paul Martin committed suicide.

That tragedy marked a new beginning for the Martins. Overcoming their own anguish, they got involved in a concerned parents' group which now thankfully number over 4,000 around the nation. The group they joined was sponsored by their local PTA. "What we found out," Gene Martin later wrote, "was that there were a lot of people out there hiding from the problem. When you want a community involved you have to start with the PTA because they have the framework already set into place."

For the Martins, rediscovering the PTA was really a godsend. When their younger daughter showed some of the same symptoms Paul had shown, they were now ready. No longer ignorant, they knew that the most effective antidote to the terrible impact of drugs on a young life is active involvement by parents and teachers. They had learned that the lure of drugs must be met by the love of parents.

In fact, we are already witnessing the results. Last year, the number of high school students using marijuana dropped to the lowest level since the National Institute on Drug Abuse began to keep figures in 1975. Your power is being felt. And it must continue. There are thousands of Paul Martins whose lives depend on us.

Through the Chemical People project, which the PTA did so much to advance, and my trips around the country visiting schools, drug treatment programs and parents' groups, I've gotten a feel for the devastation that drug and alcohol abuse is creating among our youngsters. At first, the sheer scale of the problem seemed overwhelming.

Children have talked frankly to me about how early they began to experiment with drugs, and how, for many of them, school became little more than a place to buy dope and get high. But I've also had the chance to see something else -- something which I'm afraid has been too often overlooked during the last twenty years. We must recognize the fact that powerful, indeed, essential weapons in the arsenal of parents and teachers are guidance and discipline. Children may not ask for it in words, but their actions are often a scream saying, "Help me. Set limits. If I have to go it alone, I can't make it."

A mother, whose 16-year-old daughter was finishing a bottle of Jack Daniels every night and experimenting with LSD during the day, put it this way, "I think parents have to take over and be parents again. When I was growing up," she said, "my parents said no and that was it -- but I wanted my children to be my friends and that was wrong." In the words of another parent who had learned the hard way, "Discipline is something you do for a kid, not to a kid."

I think if we really "believe in children," we owe it to them to really be grown-ups. One of the wisest and most loving

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replies I've ever heard of from a mother to a daughter was when the child shouted, "I hate you," and the mother replied, "And I love you enough to let you hate me."

Discipline is the kind of love that hurts to give. But if we can muster the self-confidence to guide them, and the love to protect them, drugs will never stand a chance.

God bless you all.

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