

In the second part of our focus on juvenile justice, Security Correspondent Ann Murphy hears the story of a juvenile offender as told by his devastated mother

Problems started at age of 12

*JOHN's issues began four years ago at the age of 12 when he had his first alcoholic drink.

It led to a downward spiral, which resulted in him currently serving a sentence in St Patrick's Institution.

2006: First got into trouble, when he was just 13 years old. He and friends interfered with scaffolding at a site and gardai were alerted. He was processed through the juvenile liaison office and was given an informal caution. He was given four further cautions after that. His mother contacted the Health Service Executive and a social worker was appointed.

2007: His mother realised he had started using drugs, starting with cannabis. He went on to use other drugs including horse tranquilisers, Benzylpiperazine, ecstasy and cocaine.

2008: He continued his addictions to alcohol and drugs, and was regularly missing from the family home. He went into foster care for a weekend to give his mother a break but was unhappy and ended up sleeping in a Cork garda station for a night because gardai could not contact a social worker. He was treated for his addictions in the Aislinn Centre in Kilkenny and in a facility in Dublin over Christmas.

2009: In February, he was sentenced to St Patrick's Institution for young offenders for breaking windows. When he returned home, he had returned to his addictive habits, after being drug-free between November and February. He was hospitalised twice in May for drink and drug-related incidents. He is now back in St Patrick's Institution, serving a number of sentences.

* Not his real name.

Y SON is two different boys — the nice one and the one who is addicted to drugs and drink.

These are the heartbreaking words of Rachel — not her real name — whose son is serving a sentence in St Patrick's Institution for assaulting gardai when they were attempting to arrest him.

This is John's second stretch in St Patrick's since he turned 16 years old in January.

Now, Rachel is terrified that a life in the criminal justice system awaits him if his addictions to alcohol and drugs are not treated.

She has managed to secure a bed for him in a treatment centre for underage youths but fears he will lose the bed if he cannot get into the drug-free unit in St Patrick's before his release. He needs to be drug free for three weeks before he can take up the place in the treatment centre.

Rachel's life has been immersed in dealing with John's problems over the past two years. But the difficulties she and her family encountered stem from the fact that John — not his real name — has been drinking since he was 12 years old.

"He started drinking at the age of 12, back in 2005, I think. He was hanging around with older lads at that stage," she said.

"His behaviour became erratic and he would go missing for days at a time. He could go to school on a Thursday morning and not be seen again until Tuesday. He would go from house to house and I would not know where he was. He was never here at weekends."

She spent several nights and days driving around in her car, trying to find him.

She said: "I spent two years on the road at all hours of the day and night looking for him but I could never find him. It was like a game of cat and mouse."

She said that his behaviour had gone out of control by the end of 2006, just before his 14th birthday.

She enlisted the help of the Health Service Executive (HSE) and a social worker was appointed to the family.

All the while, Rachel hid her son's problems from other members of her family.

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The only bright part was that despite his disappearances from home, he continued to go to school.

She said: "He is highly intelligent and very bright, and has the potential to be whatever he wants to be."

Needing a break, Rachel managed to organise temporary foster care for her son for one weekend last summer, with the help of the HSE.

However, John was unhappy and wanted to return home, and ended up sleeping in a garda station for a night because gardai could not get in touch with social workers after business hours.

Rachel explained: "He did not even spend one night with the foster family."

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He is now choosing to work on the landings in St Patrick's Institution to earn €10 a week, instead of attending classes in the facility. She sadly said he has never expressed any interest in following any course or career after school, despite being very intelligent.

And she added: "He was a very good soccer player as well but he has also lost interest in that."

Last summer, she decided to take him on holidays to Spain for a break. But the holiday turned into a nightmare on the very first day.

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But although she is frustrated, she says she loves her son and that his problems are fuelled by his addictions to drugs and alcohol.

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