

Like many alcoholics, he can't quit hoping

By *BRIAN CHRISTOPHERSON / Lincoln Journal Star*
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Here comes a man to the biggest hurdle in a life that's been defined by falling down.

How does he face it?

He flips through a photo book in his mother's living room.

Bob Howard is trying to find a picture of hope.

He spent so many of his yesterdays feeling like he was playing for nothing. But now just look where his finger's pointing.

He's found something.

"That's her."

That's her. A blonde-haired beauty, going on 2½.

"They say no one else can make you sober, which is true, but for me, I need a big motivator," he says.

"When all else fails and I don't want to stay sober for myself, I just think about her."

A 2005 survey: The Lincoln Council on Alcohol and Drugs showed that 93 percent of parents in Lancaster County disagree with underage drinking.

Local high school seniors were asked if they had tasted alcohol — 75.5 percent had.

A 2006 survey: LCAD found the average age at which Lancaster County kids drink more than a sip of alcohol without a parent's permission is 12.

Bob's on the phone.

"You must be wondering what kind of loser you're talking to here, a 30-year-old man living with his parents."

True statements: Bob is 30. Bob is living with his parents.

But a loser? Not yet.

A defeated man wouldn't schedule his life around those weekly meetings. He wouldn't have fought all those demons the past 14 months to stay sober.

He wouldn't want to tell his story — for everyone to see — in the hope that maybe, just maybe, it might help hold him accountable.

And so he begins to tell about himself as a boy, a self-described skateboarding punk.

Ten is the age Bob first remembers taking his old man's beers.

Two years after that, he was doing acid, popping pills, smoking dope.

He'd go to school and sit in the last row of five kids. The teacher would pass out four tests.

"They knew I wasn't going to do it anyway."

The way Bob saw it, life was a hassle.

"I couldn't wait to die and find out what's after life."

So he pushed life to its edge, often taking a friend to the fight. A day might be tolerable with a beer in hand.

"It was like, in my mind, it will make me better or take me to that place where I feel better. But ultimately it makes you go deeper and just constantly torture yourself. It's like I was not happy unless my life's miserable."

Bob's past misery stretches long.

Should he tell about getting kicked out of Lincoln High after one month? About those countless hours in self-help groups? How can he begin to explain what it was like to be the 15-year-old sitting in a meeting for alcoholics?

"I'm the self-help guru," he says. "One day I'm going to write a book about it all."

He talks about his last fall.

He'd been drinking that night. Twenty seconds of anger against his child's mother and another man produced an assault charge and an eight-month stay behind bars.

While he was locked up, the mother put the baby in foster care.

Bob sees his little girl on supervised visits one hour a week now.

He'd like to regain custody, but for any hope of that he would have to show a change in self.

It's been 14 months since he left jail.

At the alcoholism meetings, the voices say the same thing they said 15 years ago.

"You're thinking, 'I know all this. Why do I need all this?' But you really do."

He tries to listen better. He tries to accept advice better. He thinks about God now. His mom collects rosaries. He plays his guitar when his mind starts to wander.

"It's every day," he says when asked if New Year's was a particularly hard day to stay sober. "Every day is hard."

He reminds himself: A hard day sober beats a hard day drunk.

"After awhile, (drinking) wasn't fun. It was a business," he says. "It was very, very important to me. That's when you know it's pretty sick, when it's not for pleasure. It's tough work after awhile satisfying yourself."

Some people will look at Bob and not give him much of a chance.

Those people should talk to Kelly Madigan Erlandson, a counselor at BryanLGH Independence Center and author of a soon-to-be-released book, "Getting Sober: A Practical Guide To Making It Through The First Thirty Days."

It's not unusual for Erlandson to hear people refer to themselves as hopeless cases.

She always tells those people the same thing.

"There's a way to tell if they're a hopeless case, one simple way to tell. Are they breathing? If they're breathing, they're not a hopeless case."

In July 2005, Allen Superior Court Judge Fran Gull presided over an Indiana case about a fatal crash caused by drunken driving.

The Fort Wayne Gazette quoted defense attorney Mitch Hicks saying: "He had opportunities to rehabilitate himself, but it's a disease. It's not only a matter of wanting to quit."

Gull's response: "It's not a disease. People say that time and again, but it's not."

So goes an argument centuries old.

For the record, the "people" at the American Medical Association call it a disease.

October 28, 1990, was the night Tom tried to become a hopeless case.

He was only in college, yet he already had surrendered to the idea alcohol would take his life. So why not get it over with?

He borrowed his friend's new car. Another friend was in the passenger's seat. He'd kill them both maybe.

"Alcoholics are selfish people," he says.

He put foot to pedal and drove into Stevens Creek. What he remembers next was his friend crying over him. He kept saying: "You look great. Don't die. You look great. Don't die."

Tom moved his spine 2½ inches, cut off part of his ear and tore his gums away from his mouth.

But he failed. He didn't die.

"I no longer thought drinking would kill me. I no longer felt I deserved to feel better," Tom says. "I always drank to feel better. Now, I felt, 'You deserve whatever the hell you get.'"

Tom is not his real name; he asked to be anonymous in this story because of his work in Alcoholics Anonymous. He's 35 now. He lives in Lincoln, runs a successful business and has a wife and two sons.

And he hasn't touched a drink since that night.

He began drinking at 13. You could call it love at first sip.

"It just seemed like the whole world stopped spinning, like it was a crystal-clear point in my life," he remembers. "I turned to my buddy and said, 'This stuff is great. Why aren't people like this all the time?'"

High school became a trail of whiskey drops and parties that are tough to recollect.

"To me, life was just so friggin' mundane without drinking," he says. "It was like being drunk wasn't the problem. I had no idea how not to be drunk, that was the problem."

By age 18, he was blanking out for days.

On July 3, 1989, he stumbled into detox. Upon his arrival, a worker said: "Out celebrating the holiday a little early, aren't you?"

"What holiday?" Tom asked.

He had been drinking for 90 consecutive days.

Sure, there were times when Tom really wanted to quit. But then he'd find himself on his second drink, wondering how he got inside the bar in the first place.

"I'd see myself in a mirror and be all the way gone and I'd look at myself and know that I didn't intend to be that way. It was those moments staring at myself that I knew I couldn't kid myself."

Another story of shame: He spent 1½ of his teen years trying to get a date with a

certain girl. The girl finally said yes, leading Tom to the notion that life might be OK so long as this date was a success.

Hours before the date, some buddies persuaded him to have a drink.

"When she called, I couldn't have gotten out of the building I was so drunk," Tom says. "I just remember her screaming into the answering machine, 'I hate you. I hate you.'"

And then ... the scoundrel disappeared. Tom walked into an AA meeting and loved it instantly.

"It's like the whole world would cry and say, 'Why do you drink?' It's like, 'If you ask that question, you aren't going to understand my answer, 'cause it kills me to be sober.'"

On his ninth day in AA, an ex-con who killed two people while driving drunk came to speak.

Chi, as Tom calls him, had been sober for 34 years and was nothing short of legendary in AA circles. He had gotten sober in prison and became a model of how a man could recover.

After Chi told his story, Tom approached him to shake his hand.

"I looked in this guy's eyes and the look in his eyes, it was like you can just tell the guy loves you. It's like, people who lie to you in a room for an hour don't look like this guy looks."

AA is a 12-step process, but if a person were to try to sum it up in one tidy sentence, Tom would put it like this: "Our real thing is we can't beat it. We humbly learn to rely on a higher power."

You can't be your own god because you are your own problem.

Tom's been sober 16 years now. Only twice in that time has he had urges to drink — once in year one of sobriety and again in year four.

"I thought, 'What would shut off the voices in my mind?' It went, 'Vodka.'"

He prayed. Obsessions passed.

Then came the reward. One day 3½ years into being sober, he was driving toward North Bend.

He looked out his window, and he saw color.

"I couldn't remember the last time I noticed the color."

Tom's one of those speakers trying to inspire at AA meetings now. He has sponsored people who have gone on to become sponsors themselves.

When one of the men he sponsored got married, the father of the groom approached him.

"I owe you more than any man alive," he said.

Tom beams when he remembers that moment.

"To go from having so little hope to having a real contribution in life, it's just humbling that God would let you be something like that," he says.

One last question, Tom. What if you hadn't quit 16 years ago. If the booze hadn't taken your life by now, what would have become of you?

"Hell, I woulda been a bum. I woulda been a bum."

The stigma is almost as strong as the disease.

“People need to know that it’s not just a bunch of low lifes with no willpower,” says Erlandson, who forged her own recovery story in her teen years. “But they’re accomplished, successful, creative people that have a disease they need to treat.”

It’s not rare for Erlandson to see someone fail eight times before succeeding on try No. 9.

Rod Bowder, a regional business manager for Valley Hope Association, puts it another way.

“This disease has the patience of Job.”

He would know. Until he quit on Oct. 11, 1993, his life was going down the tubes.

“Lunch breaks were drinks. Coffee breaks were drinks.” He had a good job with the state of Nebraska — had being the key word. The booze made him burn too many bridges.

One of the toughest parts about quitting for him was that when he drove to self-help meetings he had to pass the liquor store he used to frequent.

“I’d wonder, ‘What are they doing in there now? Are they talking about me?’”

Move 13 years ahead and see a man with 600 patients. See a man who saved his marriage. It’s been 32 years since the wedding day.

“I don’t know if I could really explain the rewards of it,” Bowder says of his work. “It really helps you get up in the morning and want to go to work.”

Erlandson feels that same exhilaration. When she tells people what she does, it’s not uncommon for them to respond: “Oh, what a depressing job.”

She usually corrects them.

“Actually I work in a miracle factory. I get to go to work where people come in broken and many leave restored.”

Fifteen minutes until another meeting.

Bob waits outside, taking up the fifth step, smoking a cigarette.

A few minutes earlier, he had ventured inside the building behind him and spotted a man looking at pamphlets. The man was young, younger than Bob.

Bob did not say anything, and now sitting on those steps, he found himself regretting it.

“I was going to give my number and say, ‘Hey man, if you ever need to talk ...’”

He’s heard all the stories in the meetings. A man can change. He can change. He is changing.

That’s what he says.

“That’s where I’m at today. I want to help others.”

He can’t lose, won’t lose.

That’s what he says.

“If there is one thing in my life that I could ever not blow up or screw up, this is it.”

He sees the man who was in the building. He waves.

In a minute, that man is on the fifth step.

Bob begins to tell his story.

Reach Brian Christopherson at 473-7438 or bchristopherson@journalstar.com.

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