

Daily decisions help determine recovery

By ANGI KELLER
L-V Staff Writer

CLARION - The path to recovery after the abuse of alcohol and other drugs has come to the forefront of countywide discussions this month.

But, as those who are walking that steep and rocky trail will attest, it is the daily acknowledgment of and conversation about the fight that keeps their feet moving in a more positive direction.

September was recognized by the Clarion County Commissioners as a special time to focus on drug and alcohol (D&A) recovery.

National Alcohol & Drug Addiction Recovery Month

The county's D&A program has recently been merged into the Armstrong-Indiana D&A human services organization and Clarion leaders have kicked off what they hope will become an annual commemoration of the recovery process.

Other area counties already mark off calendar

space each year to catapult conversation about the topic into the community.

Although this is Clarion's first official attempt at a county-wide recognition of the battle so many in the region fight to conquer, plans are already in the works for community

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Recovery

activities and events for next year.

But, according to those in D&A recovery, the struggle is won on a daily, and sometimes minute-to-minute, basis.

No one, it seems, intends to engage in the warfare. All have a unique entry point into the conflict and all have a unique journey out. But, for those in D&A recovery, each and every one has experienced an unforgettable period of hitting bottom that forced them into a new direction.

[Editor's Note: Names were not used in this story to protect the anonymity of those involved.]

One local middle-aged man is presently without a driver's license and confined to residing in Clarion County due to a post-jail probationary period following several drunken driving arrests.

He got his start using alcohol and cigarettes as a teenager in a broken home.

Soon, he had two underage drinking convictions.

Still a teen, he headed to military basic training, which, he recalled, "was a license to drink" on weekends and breaks.

Admitting to "hundreds" of instances of driving under the influence of alcohol, his luck ran out and he was caught and convicted of three DUI offenses, one of which injured the occupants of another vehicle.

"I don't even remember it — just bits and pieces," he admitted solemnly. "I had a blood alcohol content of 0.256 percent. You have no idea how much drinking affects your judgment. I really thought I was fine."

In the mix came another blow — a fall in a drunken stupor left him seriously, but temporarily, physically disabled.

"I didn't care if I lived," he said. "I wouldn't listen to anybody. I didn't care about myself and I took a lot of chances."

He ended up being court ordered to a year in jail but was released into a work program after seven months served.

As part of his sentencing, he was ordered to attend a local 12-step recovery program called Alcoholics Anonymous (AA).

"It really didn't sink in," he confessed, "and it isn't the same if someone is making you do it, but something there got a

years old and her brother was five.

Her father remarried and had five other children.

Her mother remarried five times and had another baby girl.

As a young girl, her families moved continually, forcing her from one school district to another and she admittedly used school as a coping mechanism.

When she was barely a teenager, she was partying several times a week with her mother and stepfather.

"The first time I got high was with my mom," she recalled. "She kept egging me on to drink everybody's half-full drinks and try drugs and kept giving me more."

"At the time, I didn't know any different," she now realized. "I thought it was pretty cool that I could party with my mom. I had no idea that is not what a mom is supposed to do until years later when I had my own son."

Even though her coping method transferred from school work to alcohol and drugs, the woman continued to excel in the

Although he committed only to serving in the Army's reserve unit, the habit to drink was clearly formed by the time he attended trade school and gained employment.

The sudden death of his younger brother at the age of 20 only sent him further into his addiction.

A marital commitment and a baby soon added complexity to a life dependent on the use of alcohol as a coping mechanism.

Even though he was consuming multiple drinks on an every-other-day and eventually a daily basis, he failed to realize his need.

"I always looked at someone else and said, 'Well, I'm not like he is. I'm not that bad,'" the man decided. "I told myself I only drank beer and didn't use drugs so I wasn't an alcoholic."

"I never got hangovers and never got sick," he added. "I thought I was a social drinker."

He said he went through a period of time of "clean up" and attempted to change his life direction strictly with his motivation and spiritual conviction but that didn't last.

What did continue were the broken promises to others and himself — and an increasing alienation from anyone who attempted to offer genuine assistance.

hold of me and eventually I went back on my own."

He said it took a while to become accustomed to the intimacy of the group.

However, before long, the group and his acquaintances there, became his lifeline to recovery.

The man has been attending several meetings a week for more than a year.

"I'm still not comfortable in public," he admitted. "It's embarrassing and people judge you."

"I know if I keep talking about it and doing something about it every day, I'm going to come through the other side of this," he said decidedly.

"I don't know where I'll be two years from now," the man concluded, "but I know I'll be better than I am today."

"Tomorrow" is a word few who abuse drugs and alcohol utilize. Addiction is always focused on "today."

Even as a young girl, another area woman navigating through the recovery process, had difficulty envisioning a future.

Now 51, she speaks with hope on every subject and refuses to dwell on yesterday.

Yet, her past is deep and troubled and her story would stir even the most apathetic.

Her mother and father divorced when she was two

an undergraduate degree in psychology and went to work in the human services field.

"When I drank, I got the false self confidence enough to talk to people," she remembered. "I was a blackout drinker from the very beginning. I drank to get drunk."

When she was 16, her mother kicked her out of the house and she moved in with her dad and stepmom.

Not long after the transition, he father got hit and killed by a drunk driver while loading items at an auction.

"It was so traumatic. Even though everything was always wrong, I always knew I was Daddy's little girl."

"Shortly before the accident," she paused, "he yelled at me and we weren't speaking to each other. It was an awful guilt to carry and I just stayed drunk so I didn't have to feel anything."

"In my early 20s, I would party all night, shower and go to work and do it all again," the woman said. "We didn't get six packs — we got kegs every night."

Her brother, at the age of 28, got drunk and high, stole a car and died in a violent crash.

That same year, the woman gave birth to a son.

"As soon as I found out I was pregnant, I stopped doing drugs and never went back," she said.

She admitted, however, that near the end of the pregnancy, she broke down on occasion and drank alcohol.

"It was hard," the woman recalled, "but I think I just wanted that baby so bad I would try everything to do it right because I loved him so much already."

Her marriage was short-lived.

Some of the recreational changes stuck but she started "making distinctions about what was legal and not legal."

"I kept drinking because I told myself it was legal," she said. "I just took my baby with me."

Eventually, the young boy started to realize his mother had a drinking problem and confronted her about it.

She sought treatment for drugs and alcohol abuse and depression.

"Mostly it was just an effort to save my ass or save my job," she confessed.

"One thing is, though," she pointed out, "I never allowed my son to drink."

She said that, as a

She described herself at that breaking point as "hopeless, helpless, worthless and suicidal."

It was then, she said, that she realized that "maybe I had a drinking problem — maybe."

But, she said, she had a moment of "divine revelation" as she envisioned her entire past in her mind.

"I looked at my drink and it hit me that I had lost my father, my brother and my son and now my career because of alcohol," the woman remembered. "I walked over to the sink, poured out my drink and that was the last sip I took."

Now sober for five years, the woman said she "clings" to her AA connections and the practical tools the 12-step recovery program offers.

"I didn't want to believe in God," she said. "I remember being sent to Vacation Bible School when I was five and them telling me God loves me. I thought, 'Well, if God loves me, then why am I wearing makeup to cover up my bruises?'"

Her struggle eventually lifted, she said, and her "higher power became a

they are. G-O-D can stand for a 'Group of Drunks' and can mean that greater numbers equals greater power than ourselves or 'Good Orderly Direction' or whatever."

She stressed that an organized recovery program is not an instant cure-all and takes daily commitment and the use of innumerable tools to fight ongoing temptation.

In her five years of recovery, she explained, out of a dozen girls the woman has tried to mentor, "two are dead, two are sober and the rest are somewhere in between."

But, for her, the road ahead is welcoming.

"I can laugh again," she said repeatedly. "It's such an attraction to be happy."

"There is no sense wasting energy on what was," she concluded. "Our past can be the greatest asset we have to keep us moving to a great future."

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young man, however, he started to party with his father and friends.

"His biggest goal was to make it to the age of 17 so he could quit school," she said. "He had an IQ of 128 but went out of his way to show people he could be stupid."

In July 1999, at the age of 16, her son attended a party where the alcohol was provided to him by adults.

Early the next morning, he was in a rush to work and crashed his van into a tree. His blood alcohol content at the time of the crash was 0.246 percent.

He never regained consciousness and the woman had to instruct the doctors to disconnect her son from life support after three weeks in a head trauma medical unit in Pittsburgh.

Between the ages of 14 and 45, she herself had been convicted of five DUIs and had wrecked more than a dozen cars due to drunken driving.

After her son died, the woman plunged into drinking even more and eventually lost her job.

"Then I did what any good alcoholic would do," she said, "I bought three cases of beer and shut myself in my house for three weeks and only left to get more beer and cigarettes. My co-workers thought I was dead."

spiritual being known to her as God."

"I knew when my son was born it was a miracle," the woman decided, "and I knew there was a higher power but I didn't know how to make the connection."

"AA is good for the atheist, too, or for those who haven't figured out where

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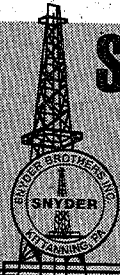
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