

Fighting back: A recovering addict speaks out



Beautiful victory: journey of recovery

By LOU DESSO

Our society today is engaged in a bitter battle that has been described as the war on drugs.

The price we are all paying for what at times seems to be a losing battle is well documented. This is about my personal battle with alcohol, drugs and gambling. It's a battle that took me to places that I'm not proud to have been, one that put my family through years of pain and suffering and ultimately nearly took my life. It also is a story of celebration, one that will describe how from the dark depths of despair came a glimmer of light, followed by a ray of hope, then a new way of life.

Born and raised in Troy, I recall my first 12 years as pretty normal. The oldest of two children, I was raised by middle-class Christian parents who instilled in me a healthy value system that I would gradually lose to my disease and return to in my recovery.

Curiosity motivated me to take

my first drink at age 12 while attending a party with my parents. I didn't like the taste, but I can still recall the effect. It sent warm tingles through my body, released my inhibitions and made me laugh. From that point on, I drank whenever the opportunity presented itself.

High school was a troubled time in my life. My family moved to the country and as an overweight, tough city kid, I just didn't fit in.

Even before the start of the school year, I was beginning to have adjustment problems. This set the stage for my introduction to marijuana and the realization that, when I was high, everything seemed alright. It relieved my fears and insecurities and replaced them with a false sense of courage that enabled me to do the things I couldn't do on my own.

In retrospect, one can see I was already in the early stages of addiction as my grades plummeted to barely passing, I began to have trouble with the law and at the end of my sophomore

year, I was expelled from school. I finished my last two years of high school in a military school where the discipline was expected to straighten me out. My grades improved, but my alcohol/substance abuse and gambling got worse.

The next five years of my life I would describe as a "living nightmare." At my parents' request, I entered college in 1971. I quickly found that parties and drugs were everywhere. I hung with the losers and, within a short period of time, I was out of control.

With my tolerance to alcohol and marijuana growing, I began to use other drugs: amphetamines, barbiturates, heroin, cocaine, anything to escape reality and to feel a sense of well being. I was now consumed with the obsession to get high. I finally quit school three months before I was to receive my associate degree.

During this period, I entered counseling due to my second driving while intoxicated arrest. Eventually, I would be arrested two more times for DWI offenses

and would lose my right to drive for 10 years.

By the time I was 20 years old, I had lost all my motivation to succeed and my self-esteem was gone. By now I was involved in illegal activities to support my habits. Years of stealing, selling drugs, assault charges and illegal gambling led me in and out of local prisons, emergency rooms and finally to five years probation.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, in 1976 I received the biggest break of my life; I met my wife, Deb. I fell in love and, for the first time in my life, I had a reason to try to control my use but, of course, I couldn't. Four years later, we were married and shortly thereafter we were blessed with our first child, Jonathan. It was the look on my son's face after not making it home for his second Christmas that was the final straw for this alcoholic.

My last excuse — that I drank because I wanted to, not because I had to — was finally gone. That look on his face haunted me and,

two weeks later, following a family intervention, I entered into treatment Jan. 13, 1983. I've been alcohol- and drug-free ever since.

My life today has changed dramatically. When I was two years sober, we were blessed with our daughter, Jamie. In sobriety, I returned to school and am now a senior in college. My wife and I are state-certified alcoholism counselors working at Clinical Services and Consultation. I realize today the simple things in life are what really matter.

Other than my family, the thing I'm most grateful for is the ability God has given me to help others. My recovery has given me the chance to give back to life. How fortunate I am. The disease that nearly killed me has been my vehicle to a beautiful way of life. If you're losing the battle with alcohol or drugs, I pray you find what I have. The victory is a beautiful journey.

This story is dedicated to all the people who helped me get sober, especially my Mom, Dad, brother Jim, wife and children.