

(6)

BUILDING A NEW LIFE

Hallucinating and restrained by sheriff's deputies and hospital staff, this once-happy family man received an unexpected gift from God—a firm foundation in sobriety that would hold up through good times and bad.

WE HAD BEEN in the fields all day baling hay. When the work was done, the men brought out a gallon of muscatel. I took a few drinks because I wanted to be like the men, and for a few minutes I felt like one of them. Then I fell asleep under the outdoor table where my mother fed the workers. When I was found, they carried me into bed, and the next day I got a scolding. I was six years old.

My early years were spent on my aunt and uncle's farm. They raised me after my father and mother divorced. My father kept my two brothers and two sisters; my grandmother took me, the baby, and when raising a baby was too much for her, I ended up on the farm.

Life was hard work in those days. We ate what we grew ourselves, plus the few store items we traded for. By age eight I was guiding a horse-drawn plow by myself. In the family and in our farming community, we spoke only Spanish. It wasn't until I went to school that I was forced to speak English and was told that speaking Spanish wasn't right. I never felt I was as

smart as the other kids or as good as anyone else. On the farm I knew I could do anything; in school it was a different story.

At thirteen I was tall, strong, and looked older. My aunt and uncle had sent me to live with a family in a larger town to get schooling they hoped would help me. I went around with guys who were eighteen, and they took me to a Halloween party. I almost choked on the first sip of the whiskey they were passing around, but by the second sip, I thought it was pretty good stuff. It made me feel like one of the guys. It didn't matter that I was only thirteen; I felt just as old as they were. By the end of the night, I had passed out in the outhouse and had to be carried home by a friend.

By fifteen, picking produce in the summer to earn money, I was sneaking out nightly to drink beer in the fields with the other pickers. Primed with beer, I could talk to girls and go to dances. I was just like everyone else; I could enjoy the day. I was the equal of others, even if they were older.

The next summer I began working construction during school vacation. I was working with the older men, and at the end of the day, I went to the bar with them. The bartender would put the beer in front of the man next to me, but it was intended for me. I loved Fridays—payday—when we went out and got loaded. I started getting liquor on weekends so I could go to dances. I was hanging around with guys who drank like me. We'd put our money together to get enough booze for the night, and because I looked older, I bought the liquor. I could talk to the girls. I was a big shot with the guys because I had the booze and the girls.

Two days before Christmas I was on the way to basic training. On the train's next to last stop, my buddies from home and I got off and rushed to the bar to buy liquor to celebrate Christmas. Back on the train, we were warned that the M.P.'s were throwing bottles out the windows, so we drank ours hard and fast and got loaded.

After basic we were sent to different bases. I didn't drink often because I wanted to get ahead, but every time I drank, I wouldn't stop until everything was gone. I didn't know how to say, "I'm going to quit now."

At home on leave, I married a young woman from my hometown, and our first daughter was born the next year. When I came home from the air force, soon after that, the party really started. A big hero like me! I drank only on weekends at first, drinking and dancing with my old buddies and their new wives. The only car accident I was in while drunk happened that year. It was a hit-and-run on a parked car, and my buddy just pulled the car's fender off the front of my car and we kept on driving. The next morning we looked in the paper to see if the accident was mentioned. It wasn't, and we were never found out.

The same construction company I had worked for in the summers as a high school kid hired me as an apprentice carpenter. I was smart and learned fast. Then I got too smart and forgot all that company had done for me. I complained to them about money I thought they had promised, and they fired me.

Using the G.I. Bill I went to mechanic's school at night and got a job with the city. That's when I really started drinking. These guys had a ritual. As soon as

they got to work, they bought a bottle of wine. At first I didn't participate. I didn't drink wine, not a tough guy like me. But then one day I decided I might as well drink. I had a couple and I liked it. For the next five years, I drank every day.

Finally I was injured on the job and sent home for a week, but I was supposed to call in every day. But I didn't, I couldn't; I was drunk every day. On the fourth day the boss came to my house to check on me. I wasn't there, but I returned, drunk, before they left. They didn't say anything, but the next day the union leader told me I was going to get fired. I went to city hall and resigned.

Three more daughters had been born to my wife and me during those years. I was filled with remorse, guilt, and fear because I didn't have a job. I knew I had screwed up. There was no unemployment then. To my mind it was bad luck, not me. I took whatever construction work I could get, even nonunion, whatever there was.

My first son was born, and my second son two years later. I had recovered my pride and wondered why I should make all this money for other people. I thought I should become a contractor and make it for myself, so I took the exam and got my license. I curtailed my drinking a little bit and business started getting good, so I started drinking more. I'd go to the bar and leave my crews working by themselves. By the third year I spent all my time in bars. I couldn't finish the jobs I had, and I had spent all the money. I was in bad shape. I was a full-blown alcoholic, blaming God and bad luck. It had me down; I just couldn't get back up, and I lost my business.

For the next three years I was working odd jobs, two days here, three days there. I was barely making it, with a big family to support. I didn't bring home enough. I drank it up. My wife was griping and cussing, and I just wanted to get away from it all.

I started taking jobs out of town. One time I was a foreman for an aluminum siding company. I don't know how we got jobs finished. Every morning I was hung-over, sick. The workers would have to wait for me to start. At noon I would go to the bar to fix myself up, and then I would party at night.

There was only fighting at home, and I finally moved out so the kids wouldn't see me drunk. Now I can really drink, I thought. My wife went on welfare, and I even stopped contributing after a while. I had to have enough to drink. I continued to work construction, but I wasn't very dependable. I'd work okay for three or four weeks, and then I wouldn't want to get up in the morning. I'll get another job, I would think, but I always got fired.

A few years later I was arrested driving while intoxicated, but it was reduced to reckless driving, with the help of a state police buddy of mine. I was told, however, that if I had one more offense, they would take my license away. That was at the same time as my first try at A.A. I couldn't get sober, and I couldn't get drunk. I was feeling scared, remorseful, guilty. I ran to a hamburger stand near my apartment, looked in the phone book for the number of a clubhouse for A.A.'s, and gave them a call. Two men came to my apartment and stayed with me, drinking coffee until after the bars closed. They kept coming, taking me to meetings for a month. I thought I was doing okay, so I didn't

need it anymore. It felt like those two guys were after me, bothering me too much. So I got drunk to get back at them.

After that I moved to California. My kids were on welfare while I was touring all over. I never knew anyone could make the money I made in union construction jobs in California, so I drank it up. I didn't feel bad about the kids because I was drunk all the time. I sent them presents. When I got sober, I felt bad about them, so I'd drink again. I couldn't stand being sober because I couldn't stand thinking about how I hadn't taken care of my own kids.

I did a lot of drinking on the job. Carpenters worked in shorts and had coolers of beer. There were beer cans all around the job site. I would go to the all-night store early every morning to buy a bottle of wine for my thermos, to keep me going until lunch. Then I'd buy wine at lunch for the afternoon. And on my way home I'd buy a six-pack of beer and a bottle of wine for my evening. That was the cycle of my life.

Once, I was stopped because my truck was "weaving" while I was driving home from a friend's house, and they gave me a D.W.I. It meant a \$300 fine and one year of probation, and I didn't think I would make it, so I decided to move back home.

I spent three months on unemployment, which to me meant three months of partying. When the money ran out, I looked for a job. Even though my California union card meant nothing, I got a job as a foreman back with my first employer. I look back on that now and I think, was God good to me, or what? And I was blaming God all this time for my troubles.

Since it was my first job in some three months, I

celebrated, staying drunk. I would go to the job site and get the workers set up, then take off to drink. This lasted until the day I told off the owner of a company we were working for, and I got fired. That job put me on the union hiring list, however, and I got good jobs, with good companies. I began to try to get sober. Sometimes I could last for a week or two. Then I would get drunk again. I was seeing the kids a lot then. I moved into an apartment behind my wife's house, sharing it with my father-in-law. My daughters were married by then, and my sons were in junior high school. I wasn't included in family events, but I was there.

That year I went to an alcohol treatment program twice. The first time I was in treatment, I was shaving at the mirror in the bathroom and it seemed to me that my beard was growing back in as fast as I could shave it off. Even though I was in a hospital gown, I escaped, running down the streets and jumping up and over fences. I was on the porch of a woman's house banging on the door for her to let me in when the police arrived. I tried to convince them she was my wife and my children were inside, but they saw the hospital bracelet on my wrist, and they took me back to the program.

Those were the days when they strapped you down to protect you when you went into D.T.'s. They were the worst D.T.'s I had ever experienced. I had never been so scared in my life. I thought gangsters were after me and they were going to kill me. They had me tied down, so I tried to be very quiet and hide so they wouldn't find me. The doctor told me that if I went into D.T.'s like that again I might not come out. I

stayed sober three months after that experience, going to some A.A. meetings. Then I drank again. A few months later I was back in the treatment program, not as sick this time, and I stayed sober for three more months.

Then I went on a ten-day binge. I was filled with fear and I couldn't walk. I had to crawl to make it to the bathroom. I eventually cleaned myself up and managed to work. Then a Thanksgiving party on the job started me back drinking every day through Christmas. I was laid off after that; then I really got down to some serious drinking. By mid-January I was having hallucinations that would not go away.

I called a residential treatment program and said I wanted help. They told me I could be admitted in three days. I drank to maintain for those three days. Amazingly, I knew that once I got to the program my drinking would be over.

One of my daughters drove me to the program and helped me fill out the paperwork. I almost fell down going into the building. My hallucinations began again, and the staff moved me to a room with a padded floor they called the TV room. I began to think I was in prison and these guys wanted to kill me. When they opened the door to the room, I ran for a window down the hall, thinking I would escape. They grabbed me, afraid I would try to jump through it. I kept hitting my shoulder against the wall trying to break out and picked at nails with my fingertips until they were raw. The staff called the sheriff's department, and it took three deputies, two counselors, and two nurses to hold me down and give me a shot. Finally I lay there quietly, ready to die like a man.

It was three days later when I woke up, naked and stinking. They cleaned me up and I felt great. I'd never felt so good, like I'd never had a drink. I went to the treatment sessions and listened to everything that was said. They took us out to A.A. meetings. I wanted what the A.A.'s had. I don't think I ever wanted anything as much as I wanted the program. I saw men dressed in suits in those days, looking good. That's how I wanted to be. The thought of a drink has not entered my mind since. I've thought of doing some crazy things but never about taking a drink. To me sobriety is a gift from God to me. If I drank, it would be giving the gift back. If you return a gift, the person takes it back, right? If God takes it back, I'm dead.

In my first year in A.A. I was going to at least seven meetings a week. I just loved it. I dressed up in suits like the men I had seen. I went to work building a mall, and there was an A.A. member working there who had eight years of sobriety, and we would share together every day. I know now God put that guy there for me.

During that year, I was offered a job with the city and one with a construction company out of town. My sponsor counseled me to stay where I had the support of my group and my A.A. friends; I was too young in the program for an adventure. I went with the city and am now retired from there. A guy like me—with one employer for eighteen years!

Once I was sober, my wife took me back. I felt that I had to go back to take care of the kids I had once left on welfare. My third son is our A.A. baby. I also got to see all our boys play sports. There were other

A.A.'s with kids on the teams, and we would hang around together at the games. I really enjoyed myself. My sobriety baby is now in college. I have beautiful relationships with all my kids.

Pushed by my sponsor, I got into service work right away, and I really enjoyed it. Now I'm a general service representative of a Spanish-speaking group, learning how to express myself about this great gift of sobriety in my original language.

There have been some hard times too during these years of sobriety. When I was five years sober, the daughter who drove me to the treatment program and helped me get admitted disappeared. My A.A. friends helped me search for her, but she has never been found. Her mother and I raised her three daughters. I did not have to take a drink. I went to lots of meetings to relieve the pain. When I lost a second daughter to cancer a few years ago, I did the same thing.

What I've learned is that it doesn't matter what hardships and losses I've endured in sobriety, I have not had to go back to drinking. As long as I work the program, keep being of service, go to meetings, and keep my spiritual life together, I can live a decent life.

When I look back now, I think I stopped maturing at fifteen when I started to get drunk with the older guys. I wanted to feel at peace with myself and comfortable with other people. I never found it in drinking. The belonging I always wanted I have found in A.A. and in sobriety. I don't think about drinking. God is there. My sponsor is there. All the credit belongs to God. On my own I could not have quit. I know, I tried it.