



My VA, My Story

My father died when I was 3 months old from a heart attack. My mom remarried, but I don't remember him very well. I started drinking when I was 13. Later on I would steal beer and liquor from my step dad, my second step dad. My mom and he got married when I was 16 and we didn't get along well. He took my place as the authority in the house and he was a chronic alcoholic. He had served in WWII as a construction engineer. Funny thing was he stopped drinking later in life, about 15 years before he died. He flat out quit drinking. Never went to meetings or anything, he just quit. I didn't like school when I was a kid and I stopped going when I was a junior in high school. I joined the Navy three days before my 18th birthday. It's probably the best thing I ever did in my life. It gave me a direction and a sense of purpose.

I remember after I signed my enlistment papers they had us lined up in the induction center. We were all facing forwards and they had us back up to the wall so that our backs were touching it. They told us, "If you want to chicken out now just take a step backwards." My boot camp was at Great Lakes north of Chicago and I was trained as a boiler room technician. I served in the Navy for 4 years on the USS Saratoga. During the Vietnam War we spent 260 days at sea in the Gulf of Tonkin. The Saratoga was an aircraft carrier, so we were always 50 miles off the coast of Vietnam to keep us safe from the SAM missiles. We always had a submarine and a tin can (destroyer) behind us. We lost about 7 or 8 pilots while we were there.

When I had shore leave in Vietnam I would go out and eat the local food and it was good. We used to play golf there and there was this one hole where you to watch the balls because the monkeys would come out and steal them. The natives would be out there shooting them. You had to use a big rope to get up the hill between two of the holes because the hill was so damned high. The Saratoga was a big ship with over 5,000 men on her. Olongapo City in the Philippines was the only port in the Pacific that was deep enough for us to dock at. I worked in the engine room on the boilers. She had 4 main engines and each engine had two 1200 pound superheated turbines. You had to be careful around those engines.

I got out of the Navy in 1975. When I came back from the service my step dad and I got along good because we were both alcoholics. My first job when I got back was working in the boiler room in a paper mill. After that I worked at Beloit Box Spring for 31 and a half years in the boiler room. If you count my time in the Navy, I steamed boilers for 36 and a half years.

I married my wife Sheryl in 1976. We had two sons together: Zach and Benjamin. We also have a daughter Cody who we took legal custody of when she was 15. Her dad was dying of cancer and nobody else in the family wanted her. She was pregnant at the time with our first grandchild. Everybody wanted the baby to raise, but they didn't want to raise her. My son Benjamin was the father and he was 15 and in juvie at the time. Benjamin is my problem child. I've had him in jail, I've thrown him in jail. I got to know all the cops by first name. He's been in prison a few times. I just hope he gets his head straightened a lot sooner than I did.

On January 10th, 1998 I stopped drinking, using drugs, and gambling. All in the same day. At that time, I was spending four hundred dollars a day gambling and working two full-time jobs to support my habit. The sheriff showed up at my wife's work and served her foreclosure papers on our house. I was ten months behind in payments. My wife told me, "You will call and get help for yourself, but I'm not going to guarantee that I'm going to be here when you get out." I spent a week in an inpatient treatment facility which was good but it only dealt with the alcohol and drug addiction and not the gambling. Then I spent

5 or 6 weeks at outpatient treatment. My employer let me stay on, but I had to submit to random drug testing and get rid of the little poker machine I had in my office.

Sheryl and I were married for 35 years. Eventually she found someone younger. I came back from a meeting and she told me she was going to be gone that weekend with "a friend." We got divorced about 3 years ago. That was pretty hard. I lived with my daughter and her husband for a while in their basement. I was gone one day, playing cards at the AA clubhouse, and my daughter texted me that the house was on fire. We lost the house. I lost my two cats. Right now I'm living with my oldest son Zach, his wife, and my 2 1/2 year old grandson. It's going good so far. I do most of the cooking. I stay busy. I go to four meetings a week, two for AA, and two for GA (Gambler's Anonymous). Once in a while I pick up an extra meeting.

I've been coming to the VA for about 2 years now. If it hadn't been for the VA, I'd be dead. The surgeries and the cancer treatments have kept me alive. A year ago I got diagnosed with liver cancer, but I ain't gonna quit. I'm going out kicking and screaming. No sense sitting around on my pity pot. I just live for today. I don't worry about tomorrow. I don't know what the hell tomorrow is going to bring. I'm on the Board of the Wisconsin Council on Problem Gambling and a friend asked me whether I was going to come to the board meeting. I told her, "Hell, I don't know. That's two weeks away. I don't know what the hell I'm doing tomorrow." At home, I've got a little chair and table on the porch and I go out there and smoke and watch the cars drive by. Nobody knows what tomorrow is going to bring. It's like the saying, "Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. All we have is today."

Anonymous 2014