

A JOURNEY: FROM CHILD TO ADULT COMPULSIVE GAMBLER

BY ROBERT MCGUIGAN

The gambling industry has a completely different face on it than it did years ago. Growing up all we had were board games, card games, dice games and if you wanted to play bingo you had to go to the local church. Heaven forbid if you wanted to get the latest line and bet on a college or professional sports game because you had to go to Vegas for that. Today, just pick up your local paper or turn on your TV for the latest line and also watch Texas Hold' Em. Walk into a gas station, grocery store or a convenience store and chances are you are going to wait in line for someone who is buying lottery tickets or purchasing some scratch card games. Want to play some slot machines? Just drive to your local casino or better yet, just go to the nearest pub or restaurant and there will be plenty of machines for you to play. Today you can pick up your cell phone, turn on your PC from the school library, dorm, bedroom or coffee shop and find a poker game to play and do it in complete privacy. You can also check with your off-shore bookie in the Bahamas and place a bet on any game you want. Our youth today is bombarded with all this and we have let it go unchecked. We have helped to create a major social problem with our youth that has caused havoc and financial devastation for families and loved ones. I know this all too well because my son, Jason, was a compulsive gambler and was murdered along with two other young men by a 19 yr. old University of Wisconsin student from Taiwan who was an addicted gambler as well. In all, 5 young men are dead due to the compulsive gambling addictions of these two young men.

Growing up in a small rural community, as a young lad I went bike riding, swimming, camping, fishing, hunting and watching TV just like the other kids did. To fill in time we also played a variety of dice and card games for money with family and friends. The card playing intensified as a teenager and for six of us it turned into a regular ritual. It was not uncommon for us to skip school days at a time to just play cards. My brother, who was 6 years older than me, didn't like to fish or hunt and instead he went down to the local café and played pinochle and poker with the farmers and the retired guys, much to the disliking of my dad. He carried this on into his high school years and it was not uncommon to have 4-6 tables of high school students at the house playing poker throughout the weekend and it became a regular ritual. My dad was opposed to the gambling but was overruled by my mother because to her the boys were home and safe and not getting into trouble. They would play for hours and friends sometimes had to wait hours for a slot to open up to play. When they were short handed and needed someone to sit in they would ask me and I was more than happy to oblige. Little did they realize I had spent the past few months learning the games and the moves to make and how to bet. I became quite the card player at 8 years old and the seed was planted. My brother continued on his ways and later would take 2-3 bus loads of people from work to the race tracks and was quite good at picking out the horses. A few years later he was setting up local pubs with Parley cards and would collect the money and pay the winners and collect from the losers. Needless to say there were more losers than winners. He then took the next step and became one of the biggest bookies in the area. He eventually got so big that he cut off all contact with his mother and two brothers. He had his own family and they were the gamblers. As for myself, I continued to play into my military and

married life days. I taught my wife how to play and we started going to Euchre and Cribbage Tournaments 3 to 4 nights a week. When she became pregnant with our son, Jason, we stopped playing the tournaments but would have friends over for an occasional game.

During Jason's early years I would pick him up at his mom's house and we were off to the races. Our first stop would be to get some pizza and play the games at Chuck E. Cheese's. Jason would play all the games he could and couldn't wait to cash in his tickets and win a prize. I am not sure how much money we spent but he had fun and I enjoyed watching the excitement on his face when he would pull a stuffed animal out of the machine or win a ton of tickets. After we left Chuck E. Cheese's we went to the Arcades to play more games. He would get on the rides, play the machines, and have fun with all the other kids. I was always amazed that no matter when we got there the place was wall to wall with kids and every game was taken and Jason had to wait his turn to play. The games we played and the things we did changed as Jason started to get older. He didn't like going to Chuck E. Cheese's anymore but we still went to the Arcades. When he got bored with the Arcade we would head to the bowling alley for a sandwich and more games and while there I started teaching him to shoot pool and darts. He played darts with such passion and intensity that as a young adult he entered dart tournaments for money and prizes and won numerous trophies and events. On the home front he started playing video games and would play them for hours with his friends. Around this time I purchased a PC for him. Since I was not computer savvy his friends showed him the ropes and I bought some games of skill for him to download such as Kings Corner and solitaire just to name a couple. We also started playing Monopoly and when his friends came over we would spend the evening playing it. When the kids needed a break from playing Monopoly, I started teaching them different dice games such as Yahtzee, craps, etc. One of our favorite pastimes was going camping and fishing which we did extensively. The majority of the time he would bring along a friend who did not have someone to take his place and do things with. The two of them would grow up to be best friends. At the campsite when we were done fishing and eating we would shoot dice sometimes into the early morning hours. Jason loved those dice games so much that when the weather permitted we would set up the picnic table outside, hang the lights and play for hours with friends. The same was true with Monopoly.

At 13, Jason came to live with me and we had more time to shoot darts, pool, go camping, fishing, and play more dice and Monopoly games. Looking back I can now see the intensity in his eyes and the adrenaline that was pumping through him, but I did not know at that time that gambling was an addiction and it's obvious now that he was addicted. The video and internet games became more sophisticated and he started buying more games and spent more time playing them. Trying to pull him off the internet and video games grew more and more challenging. Around this time Jason also was becoming more interested in sports and his favorite teams were the Badgers, Packers and the Chicago Cubs. He started learning the players' names, the teams they played for, and their stats and rankings as well. With his interest and current knowledge of sports he started having more contact with his uncle, the bookie. The two of them would talk sports for hours and when it came game time they would bet with each other, much to my displeasure. I tried to persuade my brother not to bet with Jason but he said it was just in fun. I told him that Jason didn't have the money management skills and did not comprehend what he was getting into but to no avail. They would make the bets and if Jason won my brother paid him and if he lost Jason didn't have to pay. That was a win win situation for my son but a losing

proposition for me.

After graduating from high school he moved in with friends and continued to play the video and internet games and betting on the sport games with my brother but the difference being he had to pay if he lost. During this period of time his interest in internet card games also took off. His friends would tell me later that he would sit up all night on the computer playing poker for money and getting the latest scores coming in from the west coast so he knew where he stood with the bookies that morning. He would sleep during the day. After going through his belongings after his death I found numerous discs about learning how to play poker and betting on the internet and I suspect now that he started learning some of those games during his high school years. The game Texas Hold' Em was on every one of those discs and there were other games I never heard of as well. Since he was now 18 and old enough he took the next step and started going to the local casino to play the different machines, poker, dice games, and Black Jack which turned out to be his favorite card game. His best friend called me numerous times and told me that Jason was going to the casino quite frequently and betting large sums of money at the Black Jack table. At first I didn't believe him until I got a call from his great aunt and found out she had given him over \$10,000.00. After finding this out I went to the casino to try and get the money back but to no avail and I also found out he was considered a high stakes roller. This is where he met Mark, the 19 year old UW student who committed the murders.

During this period of time my brother cut the family ties and Jason needed to find another bookie to place bets with which wasn't a problem. Now that he wasn't getting the info from his uncle on which teams to bet on he had to find another avenue. He found it on the internet through the different sports books that are out there and got the info he needed. They would charge a fee and would tell you which team is the pick of the week and the other games to bet on as well. He continued on betting with the bookies and eventually they cut him off for non- payment. I strongly suspect that since all the bookies in the area knew each other my brother covered the bets that Jason owed so there would be no problems for any of them. By now he was a sports junkie and needed his fix so he had to find another avenue to place a sports bet. He found it on the internet in the Bahamas called off-shore betting. All he had to do was sign up, give them all his personal info including SS number, banking and credit card info and he was ready to go. The only difference between off- shore betting and bookies is that the money had to be placed upfront and no credit accepted. No money, no bet. Since his new- found gambling buddy lived in Madison he would come over and Jason started teaching him about the different sports teams, both professional and college. Eventually he set Mark up with an off- shore account in the Bahamas and would often place bets for the two of them. One of those bets was on a pro baseball game for approximately \$8,000.00. Six weeks after meeting Jason, Mark shot and killed the boys because the bets were never placed. Had the bets been placed they would have won \$17,000 each. On the morning of the trial Mark hung himself in his jail cell. In the years following, tragedy struck the other families again with the loss of their only surviving sons. One committed suicide over the loss of his brother and the other was lost to a drug overdose. All families, including Mark's, are left without anyone to carry on their family name. It was later revealed that my aunt had given Jason \$250,000 over a short period of time and the net worth of Mark's family from Taiwan, which the police could verify, was over \$300,000,000.

A few years ago I sold my season tickets to the Badger football games to a young family and at

the time their daughter was 8 years old. I met them for dinner and we started talking about gambling and out of the clear blue sky their daughter said, “Oh, I play Texas Hold’ Em all the time but I don’t gamble, I just play with chips.” Needless to say we were all taken aback by that statement. When asked how and where she learned to play it, she said she went to candycane.com. I wish we had asked how long she had been playing it so we would have known the age she was when she started.

Gambling today has become more socially acceptable and a direct result is that more and more of our youth are getting hooked on gambling. They are jumping into it without the necessary skills and knowledge to completely understand and comprehend what they are getting into and the ramifications that can come with it. As this generation of youth start reaching adulthood, there will be more bankruptcies, suicides, divorces, embezzlement cases and other crimes. This will tax our already overburdened local, state and federal government agencies and the non-profit groups that work with them. However the cost and burden that will be placed on our society will be immensely greater but it will not compare or even come close to what it places on those individuals and their families that will be victimized by those crimes. The crimes being committed today by addicted gamblers will pale in comparison as to what they will be in 5 to 10 years. The one question that I have is, if there would have been more education, research, training and counseling in our schools and colleges across the United States on compulsive and addictive gambling behaviors, could this tragedy have been avoided?

As social workers, counselors, psychologists, criminal justice and law enforcement personnel, teachers and school administrators involved in all levels of education, you have a moral obligation, duty and responsibility to be more proactive regarding this issue and bringing awareness of this issue out to the forefront of our society. As a parent, so do I.

When my son was in his early 20’s, we discussed taking a camping and fishing trip out west to learn about fly fishing and to do some bonding. We never made that trip; however, this summer I’m going to make that trip in memory of my son and to bring awareness of this issue to the public. Think of what you can do in your schools, your practice, the public institutions you work for, your work place, and your home to bring this awareness out.

Mark gambled he could get away with murder. He lost and so did the rest of us.