

“Run fix me a drink son,” was a common request from Michael’s father when they would be out fishing and hunting on his grandparents’ 15,000 acre deer ranch in south Texas.

At that point in his life, Michael did not know anything about alcohol or alcoholism and certainly could never have imagined the destruction that the disease would bring on every aspect of his life. All he knew was that his grandparents had a large collection of pretty crystal and glass bottles and that they seemed to get friendlier when they were drinking.

Michael tried alcohol for the first time when he was eleven or twelve years old. Fixing a whiskey and water for his dad, as he had so many times before, he got curious and tried a few shots of whiskey for himself.

Reflecting on that first experience, Michael said, “I didn’t know I had the disease of alcoholism, that my body would crave it.”

For the next few years the disgusting taste and sickness that ensued from that first try would be enough to keep him away from the bottle, until he began to party as a high school jock. He and his friends would drink and smoke pot; it was all part of the high school sports culture in Wichita Falls where he grew up. He still had no idea what alcoholism really was, much less that he had the disease, yet within just a few short years it would change his life forever.

Michael graduated high school in the 1980s, when crack cocaine was just hitting the streets. It was not long before his alcoholism gave way to a crippling drug addiction, which led him into a downward spiral. He began stealing from his family and getting into trouble with the law. His first few offenses resulted in probation, which he often ignored. But minor offenses progressed to

full-fledged robbery, and eventually he wound up in a restitution center, working off his debts. There he had his first experience with an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. He remembers thinking that it was for old men who were cranky because they could not drink, not for people like him.

“I always thought a drunk was the guy under the bridge,” said Michael. “Little did I know that was the guy I had become.”

His downward spiral continued. Because of his addiction, he burned many bridges in Wichita Falls. A skilled electrician, Michael recalled there was not a single person in the industry who trusted him enough to employ him; he had betrayed too many of them. After he had stolen from his family so many times, even his own mother eventually turned him away, telling him to get out of her house. It was a desperate place to be.

Michael remembers countless nights in the depths of despair when he would throw out of all of his drugs and paraphernalia, determined to start fresh and turn over a new leaf. Then he would just wake up the next morning kicking himself for being so rash, and by that evening most of his paycheck was in the hands of the crack dealer.

Eventually by the late 1990s, Michael had decided to attend meetings through Serenity House outpatient care in Wichita Falls, but his heart was not in it:

“I would go straight from the meeting to the crack house.”

Then one night, a friend from the meeting picked him up under the guise of wanting to party. Before long they were cruising down highway 277 towards Abilene. Within a few hours, Michael’s friend had stranded him in front of the Serenity House detox facility with the

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choice of entering treatment or spending the night homeless on the streets. Furious, he opted for a few days in detox and about a month in Serenity's drug and alcohol treatment program.

"Serenity House is where it all started for me," said Michael.

He learned there for the first time that alcoholism is a disease, an uncontrollable desire to drink, that affects millions of Americans. He gained a lot of knowledge, as well as a sense of responsibility from his daily chores in the kitchen. Early in his stay at Serenity, the kitchen manager gave him a key and asked him to grab something from the storeroom. Receiving that key was a significant moment for him, after years of being trusted by no one. There were points early in the treatment program when he was determined to give up and leave, but a few key counselors and staff members, many of whom have been through drug and alcohol treatment themselves, gave him hope that he might actually be able to change.

When he finished treatment at Serenity House, Michael had the resources he needed to change his life, but his mindset was still wrong. He still thought it was just about not drinking and using, and what he needed was a total life overhaul. He would stay clean for a month or two, sometimes even as long as six months, but all the other chaos in his life – dishonesty, anger problems, relationship trouble, etc. – would eventually lead him back to the bottle and the needle. At aftercare meetings, he would see guys with ten or eleven years clean, but he did not really want to be around them because they had made those attitude and behavior changes that he just was not ready to make.

So the cycle continued for Michael until he wound up in prison. Even behind bars, the truths he learned at Serenity House continued to echo in his head.

"I could hear Jackie every day in those prison cells."

In 2002, he paroled to a halfway house, where he met his wife. Together, they continued the cycle of drug and alcohol abuse.

"All I really wanted was to use successfully," said Michael with a wry smile.

It was not until his mother's funeral in 2008 that Michael would finally get clean and sober for good.

"I had a big plan," said Michael. "When my mother died, I was going to rob the house one last time and get all the jewelry, electronics – anything of value. Then I was going to head west to drink and drug on the beach until I died."

Then in September of 2008, as his mother's funeral was finishing, a red pick-up truck full of guys pulled up. It was all the guys from the AA meetings with ten or eleven years clean; they had come to tell him they were sorry for his loss and here for him if he needed anything. In the midst of such an overwhelming gesture, he broke down and told them about his big plan. They encouraged him to come back to meetings, get a sponsor and started really working the steps.

"I didn't need to go through treatment again," said Michael. "I had all the tools I needed; I just had to use them."

Michael and his wife have both been clean and sober since October of 2008. He works as an electrician in Abilene where he also volunteers regularly with Serenity House. He sponsors other recovering alcoholics and addicts, does fifth steps with Serenity patients, and helps organize the annual recovery golf tournament fundraiser.

"Serenity House gave me my first big book. All those things Jackie pounded in – when I applied them, my life turned out to be more than I could have ever imagined."