

Sobriety story offers holiday hope

Christmas is a time when many people become depressed. Some resort to drugs or booze to cope with their emotional pain, but this usually leads them to a deeper depression.

The story below is a story of hope and rebirth: People can and do get sober in Nome!

Northern Lights Recovery Center of Nome wishes you a safe and sober Christmas.

Sometimes he awoke terrified, covered in a cold sweat, the taste of vodka in his mouth, the nightmare too real.

"I dreamed I was at a party and they passed me a bottle, and I took a shot," he says. So he prayed.

And that's about all the 40-year-old Nome man remembers of his first week as an inpatient at Northern Lights Recovery Center.

After 20 years of drinking, he's now been sober for over a year. He has a job. He is slowly replacing the hunting equipment he sold to buy booze. His mother is proud.

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Maybe you used to see him staggering down Nome's Front Street. Perhaps during a storm you walked right past him, sleeping under a cold blanket of snow.

Long before he learned English at school, he promised his mother in Inupiaq that he wouldn't be like his drunk older brothers.

But as a teenager he started drinking. "I

thought, 'Oh, hey, I'm a man'," he recalls. "Nobody told me it would be a hard time getting off that stuff."

At first he just drank on weekends. Then he started looking about for holidays. Birthdays. About 10 years ago, he

moved to drinking daily.

Once he was found nearly frozen to death on the icy Nome-Golovin trail during Iditarod month. "That didn't even scare me," he says. Days after the hospital released him, he was drunk again.

"I always told myself, I'll wait till tomorrow to sober myself up. Always tomorrow. Tomorrow. But tomorrow never came."

You wonder what scenes scorch his mind when he stops to cry, then says, broken, "Even when I lost friends to alcohol, I kept drinking."

"They either died on their own vomit or drank themselves to nothing. They

were just like the walking dead. I watched them deteriorate right in front of me."

He tried to quit five years ago. But after four months, he was drinking more than ever.

"My blacking out stages seemed like they were getting a little bit closer together," he says. "I drank myself sober. I'd drink, drink, drink, but I couldn't get drunk anymore"

He spent the summer of 1994 thinking about going sober.

"I asked my friends one time, 'What are you going to do if you see me with the Alcoholics Anonymous group or in the van? (His pals often derided the ones in treatment, the ones on outings in the recovery center's

van.) Maybe you'll make a bet about how long I'll stay sober.'" But they promised to cheer him on.

In April 1995, he quit. He did it at home. The agonizing withdrawal could have killed him.

Every part of his body cramped with pain: stomach, ribs, thighs, feet, arms, hands, neck. He could smell nothing. Nightmares gripped him. He stuffed the alarm clock under some clothes, but its persistent ticking tortured his ears.

A long week later he wanted a drink.

But he believes God flashed this message through his mind: "If you go out and drink tonight, you're going to die."

So he signed into the Northern Lights Recovery Center's inpatient program. Things went well, but after a month he wanted to give up and drink.

He believes God intervened again, this time through a 15-year-old friend.

"I'm glad to see you're doing something about your drinking," the teenager told him. "Keep it up. You looked like you were about to die. Now you look real good."

The real challenge came when he finally left the center after 53 days and faced Front Street.

"Front Street looked like it stretched," he says, spreading his arms. "But I made it. It was good to get out and be on my own."

That was more than a year ago. Now, he says, he

can sit in a bar and not have a drink. He goes to support groups meetings almost daily. He works and hunts.

But don't idolize him, he warns. He struggles still, (every hour).

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