

Justin wins battle with alcohol

by A.J. McClanahan

Tundra Times publisher

Wilson Justin knew he had hit bottom on May 17, 1983, when he had just finished a seven-day binge.

"I was drunk, hung over. I couldn't even swallow, but I still wanted to drink more. I was down to my last \$100 on Fourth Avenue, and I was in agony as I waited for the bars to open.

"I flirted on the edge of DTs before. This time I knew it was coming," said Justin, who since January has served as operations manager for Ahtna Inc. in Copper Center.

Justin, a 36-year-old Athabascan, was born in Nabesna and lived there until 1956. His family moved to Chistochina for two years, then relocated to Mentasta Lake Village. He also lived in Fairbanks and Anchorage, and he graduated from West High School in Anchorage in May 1968.

Justin said alcohol was not a major problem in his early life, even in high school.

"My environment wasn't steady



Wilson Justin lives each day for itself

drinking," he said, noting that most of the students in his high school were white. "It wasn't that big of a deal."

But he said he did drink whenever he went back to his village. "There, it's almost like a way of life. Alcohol pervades the entire family structure,"

he said, adding, "I drank when it was available."

Justin said he found it curious that he did not like the taste of alcohol itself, particularly hard liquor.

"The distaste should have been a warning. I drank for a mood," he said. "I'd have to get about half drunk before I could take the taste. But I thought everybody was that way."

Justin said through the years he worked as a big-game guide and also worked in 1970 on the North Slope. He made good money, and he drank when he could afford it. Alcohol did not seem like a problem because it generally did not interfere with his work.

Even so, he said that by the early '70s he started to feel as if drinking was not in his best interest. That was one of many warning signals he said he ignored, and in 1971 he went on a "real binge."

By 1972, Justin said he had his first "blackout," a memory loss after a

(Continued on Page Ten)

Fears, concerns

(Continued from Page One)

drinking bout that is associated with alcoholism.

That was the year that Justin said the pattern of his drinking shifted from a focus on partying with others to drinking whiskey for a "kick," a "blastoff."

Within about another year Justin said he started to have many private fears and concerns, yet, at the same time he continued to enjoy the effects of alcohol and the feeling of confidence that went with drinking. So he started laying off alcohol for long periods, but his mood swings became worse.

Justin said that's when the real battle started for him, because he very much wanted to be able to drink.

" 'I'll learn to drink like a white man,' I told my friends," he said.

Still, he continued to drink, even occasionally sneaking alcohol during work hours. During several years in the mid- to late 1970s, Justin said he generally drank by himself and flirted with danger many times.

"The question is how did I survive '73 to '83 without seriously injuring myself or someone else?"

He sustained a number of injuries related to alcohol, including auto accidents, and on several occasions he was hurt in incidents involving firearms.

On one occasion, Justin laughed at someone he had provoked into pointing a loaded .44-magnum at him. The man was out of reach, but only about 6 feet away.

"You're not going to pull that trigger," Justin said. And, the man didn't. But even today Justin wonders whether he might have.

By 1981, Justin said to himself, "Indian, you got yourself one hell of a problem. It's not going to go away."

He got to the point where nothing mattered, except for maintaining a cash flow that allowed him to drink. And by May 17, 1983, he had hit bottom. "I said to myself, 'No, I don't think I'll pull out of this one.' "

When he decided to stop that day, he broke out into a cold sweat, because he feared the nightmares and the dark thoughts that would always worm their way into his consciousness when he was sober.

And that's when the constant torture began for him. He lived hour by hour. "The whole time is just a blur. I didn't know what I was doing. I just kept promising myself if I could just get through this I would never start again."

(Continued on Page Eleven)

Alcoholics submit comments on weekend of treatment

Editor's note: These comments on alcoholism and the help they were receiving were submitted by people who attended a recent Weekend of Understand for Alcoholics at the Holy Spirit Retreat House in Anchorage. It is managed by the Roman Catholic Church, Archdiocese of Anchorage.

Confidence rebuilt

(Continued from Page Ten)

As the pain gradually eased over the weeks that summer, he began to realize that he could work. Most of all he wanted to continue to work for his people.

By October, he started working for the Village of Chistochina, rebuilding his shattered confidence. He calls the healing process "painful, bitter."

Within two years he was asked to accept the position of operations manager for Ahtna Inc., a job he knew would require much of himself.

"I was reluctant to be considered for operations manager because I wondered did I really want to go into the pressure cooker. I thought about it two to three months, and I finally decided it would make a mockery of myself if I didn't try for that position."

Today, Justin said he continues to live each day "one day at a time."

"I say let the future take care of itself. Live each day for itself.

"I think about the corporation in the future sense and the people. You have to plan ahead in business. But never for my own personal life."

Pain, grief, confusion

I am a young man of 22 years. I am also an adult child of an alcoholic. Coming from this sort of home has caused much pain, grief, confusion and irregular patterns.

I leave this weekend with a little less pain, a little less grief and not much less confused. But I do walk away with a much greater and deeper understanding of the human race I was born into, understanding of myself and hope of a future that is regularly filled with love.

The greatest understanding is that I am not the only one with a leper within. We all have a leper within, and it is precisely there that the man Jesus is waiting for you.

Time to slow down

What does a weekend at the Holy Spirit Retreat House do for me?

Well, for one it allows me time to slow down long enough to catch up with myself. Most people I know are always moving at such a fast pace these days that they seldom take time to slow down long enough to find out, or rather ask themselves questions such as why, when or where.

And the Retreat House has a relaxing sense of peace and serenity, an atmosphere full of power and sense of direction.

I have been able to overcome fear and frustration. It may be for a short period until I leave. But for now it is most enjoyable and satisfying.

For another thing, the Retreat House has allowed me to become more at peace with myself. It has allowed me to see myself in a perspective that I have not seen for quite some time. It allows me to see my goals and needs more constructively.

The Retreat House has enabled me to reach for a spirit within myself, a power of goodness and contentment. The weekend has given me the ability to be humble and thankful.

Another thing that this weekend has done for me is that it has allowed me to be me. It has allowed me to reach out to my fellow man. It has enabled me to become part of humanity again and see the good in my fellows without criticism and doubt.

I know the alcoholic in me will always be. But I also know that the peace and joy at this retreat will always be.

A.A.: Open door

To me, A.A. has been an "open door" through which I've found the love and understanding I needed to become a recovering alcoholic.

For so very long, I didn't realize that the help I needed to deal effectively with the problem could come to me only through fellow sufferers.

To enter the open door I had only to firmly close the door to drinking that I had always wanted to leave ajar. The resounding click of that door leaves me with no regret, and I look forward with joy to growing in God's love in my new life with the help of new friends in A.A.

Alienation from self

Alcoholism to me is alienation from myself. In recovery the 12-step program has guided me to a place where all the fragments of "myself" are being made into the whole, healthy person my God created me to be.

An understanding weekend provides a time for instruction, reflection and sharing with people who have the same and similar addictions. They are loving and nurturing — for anyone who has ever been or known or cared for an alcoholic.

A.A. offers solution

I was glad to find out I was an alcoholic and not just crazy. You see, my life was ugly and without joy when I was a drunk.

Now in sobriety I have found a quality of life that is beautiful and happy. A.A. offered the solution to my problem. It gave me an avenue to a sober life; the blueprint for a productive lifestyle.

I am a miracle, they say, and I believe it, considering how my life was before. I now live without fear. My past is behind me. I live today to the fullest, but sober.

Serenity Prayer

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference.