

Recovering from the Shock of Learning your Child is an Addict

by Al and Sandi

Al: I am the fourth generation of a German immigrant family to Wisconsin. We still live in Wisconsin though we've lived many other places. Germans love their beer. Every generation, our family has a number of alcoholics, including my father. I lived through the pain of my father's alcoholism and now relive it with our son. Because of the propensity in our family towards alcoholism we urged our children, an older daughter and our son David, not to even experiment with drinking because of the greater possibility of becoming an addict and because of what I lived through with my father. I've chosen not to use alcoholic beverages at all.

We knew in high school that David was drinking some and he did not want to go to a Christian College. He graduated from college in 1997 at Christmas and came home to live with us. We knew that he was depressed as he slept most of the time. He didn't seem to have a sense of direction. But once our family doctor got him on an antidepressant he felt like "partying" again. It was March 6, 1998 that we got that call at 3:00 in the morning. I honestly don't remember whether it was from the police or David himself. They had taken him to the local hospital for a blood test. He had run off the road. It was slightly snowy and he actually stopped to relieve himself and was so inebriated that he didn't know what he was doing. He could not get the car out of a ditch, where he had run into a tree and basically totaled the car by battering the front end. His blood test at the hospital showed that his blood alcohol level was over twice the legal limit for driving in the state of Wisconsin. That was his first OWI, (Operating While Intoxicated.) I was asked if I could come and get him. I had to sign a statement, as some of you have done, that I would not let him drive for twelve hours. This meant I drove him on his paper route, which he had begun a few weeks earlier. It gave us a chance to talk as he sobered up running through the cold morning air delivering the papers. "Yes, Dad, I know I should not be drinking this much and I can stop. It's ok. No big deal."

The next Friday we left for our District Church Conference and came home on Saturday afternoon ... his twenty-third birthday. When he came home about mid- afternoon he was already drunk celebrating his birthday. *Isn't that what ya' do?* Needless to say again we were very sad that he was not using better judgment. He had every intent of going out that night and continuing his partying. He was always passive-aggressive. That is, he would not argue. He would avoid conflict, but then he would simply do what he wanted to do. I ordered him not to go out again. It was one of the few times after he came home from college that he obeyed. He went down and went to bed. I knew who he was going to party with -- one of his high school friends and I called the young man and said, "My son won't be there. He's already drunk. I sent him to bed".

In those moments of lucidity he began to tell us how much he drank in college and that was only confirmed later as he continued to party with friends whose parents we knew. They told us the amount he could consume. He could buy quart malt liquor bottles and just chugalug them down. So it was sad for us to see the extent of his addiction that he had gotten into in college. He got a job landscaping that summer. He loved hard physical labor in the sun. That of course made him thirsty. So after work he and co-workers, a crew of fellows several younger than himself, headed out swimming and drinking. Night after night we never knew when he would come home or if he would come home. We were allowing him to live with us. We struggled with whether or not we were enabling him. We discussed with him the fact that if he insisted on this lifestyle we would have to ask him to move out so that we were not enabling him. It was always: "Yes, I am drinking too much but I can quit. It is not out of control."

David had been virtually a model child through high school. He had been involved in many church activities. So not only did the drinking disturb us, but also his lying to cover up, the sneaking, and the vulgar language were disturbing. This grieved us to the depths of our soul that he should be going through this; all the sleepless nights especially Friday and Saturday nights, when he did not have to go to work the next morning.

I remember well how much I identified with what John Vawter said in the **Leadership** article where he'd sit in the front pew on Sunday morning and just cry through the worship music. Sometimes I would think: *How can I get up to preach?* John said in that article: "If I were old enough I would retire. If I were rich and could afford to I would retire." I just didn't know how I could keep going on in the midst of this and often felt the same way as John did. My father had a number of accidents the last of which was fatal when he was 67 years old. I realized even though he had professed faith and I'd like to think he was a true Christian he did not gain freedom over alcohol in his lifetime. So I envisioned that could have happened to my son. There are no guarantees that this would not happen to him. I actually planned in my mind the funeral message I would do, entitled: "*A Talent Wasted*" I shared that with him one time and he said, "Dad aren't you being a little melodramatic?" Well, I would just say the pain was greater because he was such an exceptional lad. I'm sure we all think that about our children.

I was almost forty years old when my son was born. We were teaching in Africa at the time and came home in 1975 because of the communist take over there. David was that son that every man would like to have. He was President of the Student Body in Junior High, President of his freshman and sophomore classes in High School. Probably could have done that all the way through but he did not want to be responsible for Junior Prom so he elected not to run that year. He went to Boys' State as the local delegate for the American Legion program. He had been coached not to run for governor because there was only one, but rather to run for the Supreme Court because there was the possibility of five slots. Well, he got the most votes and ended up as Chief Justice on the Supreme Court at Boy State. This led him to be one of two delegates out of 960 to go to Boy's Nation in Washington, D.C., to shake hands with President Bush and give him greeting from the birthplace of the Republican Party. Because of that achievement in high school, he got almost a full tuition scholarship to a very prestigious liberal arts college in the Midwest. He didn't want to go to Wheaton College where I had gone. He wanted to get away from the evangelical sub-culture and find out what the rest of the world was like. He always said to me, "Dad, I'm not like you. I respect you, but I'm different and I have to live my life differently." I later found out what he meant by that. He loved to party. He wanted to kick up his heels, whereas I, a son of an alcoholic, was always serious. I had never had a childhood. We understand that, but he didn't like that seriousness. He respected our ministry and what we stood for, but he didn't like our lifestyle. He wanted the things we couldn't afford and he was going to live differently.

In any event, to end this overview that I am giving you, he majored in Art in college. His high school faculty said, "David, you can do anything you want." He did very well in math, the sciences and in art. But his only real passion was to do art. At the end of his freshman year he did a self-portrait. It had a halo representing the spiritual dimension. On his shirt he painted demons representing the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit. It is still my favorite of his paintings. In his freshman year he was obviously struggling with life and moral issues. **Sandi:** Hello, I'm Sandi and I am a recovering parent. For all of us one of the shocks of finding out that your child is involved in an addictive behavior is that your parenting skills are immediately in question. So really, I'm Sandi and the parent of a recovering alcoholic, but also a recovering parent. I have arrived in Phoenix without my suitcase. There are some suitcase analogies that fit really well with my summary. I will tell you at the beginning and I will tell you at the end. The suitcase, which didn't show up with most of my things for the trip, is one of those interruptions that I didn't want. I didn't seek it. I didn't ask for it. I can't change it. And as you know if you have made phone calls to those automated information lines, I am left with the question: *How am I going to deal with it?* It is one of life's interruptions that I didn't want! And somehow in the midst of this, whether it is a suitcase (and I know that no analogy is perfect, but it does fit, because so many of us have to deal with those things that "come to us") or a son who is a recovering alcoholic. How do we deal with the shock, recovering and learning to deal with it? I am going to do some repeating of what AI said because I want to express: Who is our son? What is the setting in which we live? Who am I? And then the shock the awareness of the problem.

As Al said, we were given a very active, creative child. He was an honor student, a gifted teenager and he is absolutely charming. Does that sound like a make-up for an alcoholic? You bet! Our son in junior and senior high school was in the local paper almost weekly, not like the last couple years on the police blotter, but instead for some honor he had gotten, some play he was in, some choir, some place he had gone, some statement he had made, even to the point of making some of the state-wide news when they said pastors couldn't pray at graduation ceremony and our son volunteered to pray. Things like that. No matter how hard you try, you are proud of what their accomplishments are. We tried not to think that it was because we were good parents because we knew we weren't perfect parents. Everyone makes mistakes. As Al said, David was not only praised by teachers who said he could do anything he wanted to do, but Sunday School teachers who said to him, "You know more than I do. You know it all." These other kids are dealing with issues and you have it together. But David always lived a little bit on the edge or maybe I should say, more on the edge. We live in a small town and he wanted to be different. He was always the first to do something.

One of my favorite stories of when he was younger was that he would sit down and design a hairstyle and then he would go to the barber and have them do the hairstyle for him. The barber was a friend of ours. He knew that haircuts was an area we had said we weren't going to fight over. But when the other kids started to come in and say they wanted a style like David he would say, "Go ask your mom and dad".

It was hard to know whether he was just a typical crazy teenager with emotional highs and lows, wanting to and then not wanting to be with people, or whether this kid was really struggling with things in high school. We could never really get a handle on that. There were some questions about behavior, like where he had been or who he was with. But he was creative and the answers always sounded logical, and that could have been what happened. So we didn't have anything else to go on. Those were the high school years.

We live in small town Wisconsin. We do not live in high-stress suburbia with a lot of pressure being put on people with material things and issues like that. We do not live in an urban jungle. We live in a wonderful small town where it is safe to walk on the streets, but it is small town ... and that means beer ... that means beer at everything ... that means beer at a cookie party ... that is the way Wisconsin is. So parents, as well as students, are constantly "excusing" the fact that there is alcohol. "Well, that is just part of our life." "Well, you can't have a brat or pizza without beer." "Well, you can't have a jazz festival without beer." Everywhere you go people excuse the drinking. So that is the kind of community standard there is. Parents excuse their students' behavior and parents not wanting to talk to other parents about it for fear that that other parent might say something about it. That is the setting.

Who am I in the midst of this? Al grew up in an alcoholic family. I grew up in a family that when my dad became a Christian green Canada Dry bottles replaced the brown beer bottles. Alcohol and drinking were not an issue. It was honestly not something that I missed. We had a wonderful family. Because I believed in families and in the incredible power of alcohol to destroy families as well as marriages, early on I got involved in community groups for education awareness, prevention, reinforcing healthy choices, providing activities for kids. I was involved with the schools, tutoring, teachers and staff, leading small groups of students that would meet weekly to talk about either their own addictions or their family situation. I was involved at the community level. I had been President of the Community Futures for about eight years. We use United Way funding to come up with events and programs to help families deal with these issues and to try to reinforce building things into your kids to help them handle destructive behavior and make good choices. That is who I was. In fact, I was called the Red Ribbon lady because we have a big national campaign every year to encourage people to choose to have a healthy lifestyle. I was always involved in setting up speeches, helping bring speakers into the school and things like that. Along with that I really got to know our children's friends. Our Victorian home happened to be a few blocks from the high school and I liked to make cookies. So who I

am is one of those “stay-at-home Moms” who likes being busy in the kitchen. We had kids in our house all of the time and especially after school. Most of these kids had parents my age that had gone back to work. So I was the “Mom.” Lots of them talked to me when they didn’t even talk to their parents. Besides that, I liked being a Mom. I thought I was good at being a Mom. I liked having students around our house. So that is who my son is, that is who I am, and that is the setting.

The awareness of the problem increased after David left home for college. Actually the real awareness increased after he was 21, which is the legal age to drink. It was usually around suspicious circumstances; those questions that had a creative answer, but just had some holes in them. “But it wasn’t my fault.” That answer seemed to occur again and again. Then there was the depression that led to a lot of extensions on courses. And in our own trying to think the best of it thought of it as “terminal procrastination”. He just wasn’t getting things done and this is a very bright guy. He was not only not finishing things, but also not even starting them. In our shock it really wasn’t until he got caught and he got caught and he got caught and he got caught! After graduation he was arrested for OWI four times in a year and a half. In David’s last semester of college he was doing an Art semester in Chicago. His college is in St. Paul and he called us a few weeks before the end of the term. This was probably for me, besides getting caught, the point of asking what’s going on? He called up really distressed and said, “I’m going to fail.” He didn’t say that he couldn’t get his work done, but that he was going to fail. We didn’t interfere at all. Professors gave him extensions and that was when he came home. He was supposed to have completed college, but he finished course work later.

Our son’s alcoholism was frequently cloaked among other things. His depression came first. We said, “Go to the doctor. Go to a counselor.” His sister had gone to a counselor a while in high school and found some real help. David went to the doctor and found out that he did have a chemical imbalance. So we think, “okay, so it’s that.” That is the reason. We’re always looking for those reasons and in our shock we don’t want to think that it is really as **bad** as it is. How **can** it be that bad? How can he drink that much? How can he be that addicted? So we hoped for that. We began to read some books about adult ADD, (Attention Deficit Disorder.) We showed him those. Maybe that’s it. He identified with 16 out of 18 characteristics. That’s the issue! It wasn’t that we were totally in denial or that he was, but you know you keep hoping you can find answer that you can fix. You want to be able to help them. You want to be able to fix them. Of course for David, the classic phrase: “I never missed a day of work,” was used. He had a paper route early in the morning then he did landscaping. He would come home drunk, but he never missed a day of work. There must be something about an alcoholic’s honor that says if I don’t miss a day of work I am not really an alcoholic.

Well, as Al said we confronted him with deadlines. We talked to many people. How did we recover from the shock of it? We experienced a number of emotions. **Anger:** angry that he was doing this to himself; angry that he was destroying a body that he had been so proud of. He lifted weights. He wasn’t into athletics, but he is a very athletic person. Anger that he was frying and sloshing his brain. **Fear:** fear that he was going to hurt himself; fear that he was going to hurt somebody else; fear that he was going to kill himself. **Disappointment:** disappointment of so much potential lost. I said to somebody one time that I wished he had been an average student. It would have been easier to accept if he had just been average, but he was so good. He was so good at so much. **Sadness and Grief:** I felt an incredible feeling of sadness. I used to go downstairs to the bedroom and just cry and pray at the sadness and grief at this huge weight that we were feeling. **Unbelief:** And of course, the unbelief. Is it really happening to us? It can’t be happening to us. God can’t you stop this? You can do so many things. One of the questions I had to ask in terms of recovering from the shock was: Can God be trusted if I can’t trust David? If we are praying and we are not seeing a change, can I trust God? Like with so many of those “interruptions” everything from a lost suitcase ... God, I just don’t want to be bothered with a son who is an alcoholic. I love him dearly, but this wasn’t something I wanted to work on right now. So these are feelings we experienced in dealing with the shock.

I shared with my women's Bible study group. From the very beginning we were vulnerable about the fact that we were hurting. We didn't give all the details to everybody, but from the very beginning with our friends and our growth group that met at our house weekly, we were vulnerable about the pain, the frustration, the fact that we didn't know what to do, and we didn't like that feeling at all. We shared with the church. Part of dealing with the shock is that we had a wonderfully supportive group of people in the church, among our friends, in our Bible study that prayed for us, who cared and who did not condemn us and did not condemn our son. We knew we had a number of recovering alcoholics in our church. It opened up the freedom for other people to fail. Because if your pastor is struggling and he can't do anything about it, and he knows and trusts God; then my life and the stuff I've got that I can't do anything about ... then God must still be hearing me and caring for me, even if I don't see any solutions right now. So it opened up some really wonderful times with other people as well. I am grateful for the police because they did what nobody else could do. They stopped him. By their stopping him he was able to come face to face with what was happening, not right away, but slowly. Al will talk a little more about that.

Al: Something we learned from David Mains in the *Fifty Day Spiritual Adventure* was to look for "God sightings." I am going to share a few areas where we saw hope in the midst of this pain David was causing us. One is that God disciplines those who are true believers. Hebrews 12 teaches that. We prayed that somehow David would get caught; that God wouldn't let him get away with this behavior. As Sandi just said the police were God's agents to stop him ultimately. After he had offered to pray at commencement, he and a friend literally got on the national wire service because a local attorney had filed an injunction to not even let students pray and that was a hot issue back in 1993. About two weeks later our son and his best friend who had also offered to pray got picked up for underage drinking. Not drunk, but at eighteen years old ... David was saying, "All my friends are doing this and I got caught." It was a fluke that he got caught, stopped out on a backcountry road ... just one of those things. There are so many details that we could go into, but there were any number of times that he had run-ins with the police even in college he got charged with obstructing justice because he said the police had no right to come in to card a party in his house without a search warrant. They showed him that they didn't need a search warrant. They not only roughed him up, but locked him up for 48 hours. There were a number of arrests for speeding ...

I mentioned earlier that first OWI was in March 1998. The second season of landscaping in the spring of 1999 he got back out with the guys. During the winter he pretty much laid low and there wasn't much partying. But once he got back working hard the party routine started again. From about the middle of May through June '99 I don't think there was a time when he was thoroughly detoxed. That is, he wasn't inebriated, but he was on a binge. Some nights he came home and fell in bed without eating. The next night he wouldn't come home at all, but stay out drinking. He was out of control. We honestly didn't know what to do, except just keep giving it to the Lord. Earlier at our church, I had decided that we needed to learn more about corporate prayer. We had small groups where people prayed for one and another. But I thought we should emphasize corporate prayer as a church. In order to encourage that we read: *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire* by Jim Cymbala, the story of the Brooklyn Tabernacle. His daughter Chrissy was away, they focused prayer on her and she came home. God touched her. Our church was moved by that story, and someone suggested they should get together to pray for our son. They decided to do that July 1, 1999. About 25-30 people gathered for an hour and half and prayed that God would bring our son home, literally and spiritually. In fact, Sandi and I had begun a year earlier praying every night specifically for David. Well, David didn't come home that night. That wasn't that unusual, but he always came home to do the paper route. As Sandi said he was very proud of himself for never missing a day of work. Well, at noon he still wasn't home. *Is he in jail? Is he in a hospital? Is he in a ditch? Is he dead? As a parent you know how your imaginations goes wild. Where is he?*

About noon I called the local police, whom we know quite well, to ask what they would suggest I do. They told me they hadn't seen him. They suggested I start calling hospitals, police departments, and jails around where he was known to party. About 3:00 I called the County Jail. They said, "yep, we just released him." They had locked him up for 12 hours. He could have used his one phone call to call home. He didn't. He got out. He met a man from our church who is a recovering alcoholic who offered to be his **AA** sponsor. Jim said to David: "There was a group praying for you at church last night." That shook him. When I saw him, he looked like death warmed over. He was still in his work clothes. I saw him coming from my window. I went out to greet him like the father with the prodigal. I just embraced him. I said, "son, thank God you're home safe. Let's go in and pray." He said, "Dad, let's pray right here." He embraced me. He then went into his room in the lower level. I went down a little while later and he was on his face, Muslim style, praying. That weekend he went through detox. Periodically I would go down. He was just shaking. We thought perhaps God had brought him home repentant and in one sense He did. The irony of all of this is that he had just met a girl in the bar who had just turned 21, a girl who is now his wife, from a wonderful local family. He was really smitten like love at first sight. Like a dog returning to his vomit, after getting his second OWI he went back to the bars with her. He didn't tell us but he got another OWI in late August. We didn't find out until the letter came in the mail and we asked him. These were both in a neighboring county where she was living and where he had been in jail on his first arrest a month earlier.

In October Sandi and I went to England to visit our daughter and her husband who is in the Air Force. Before leaving we said to the church, "Now, David is facing jail time with his third OWI. He knew that was coming and his attorney arranged to have one court date for both of them delayed until we got home. The church knew our concern about being away from our son for several weeks. They actually set up a prayer chain to pray for him 24 hours a day for the three weeks we were gone. Whether they achieved that or not I don't know but he got his fourth OWI while we were gone. He could have gotten a year in jail on that one.

We see this as God's doing. We just could not stop him. But God did through the police. They assigned him 65 days in the county jail plus heavy fines. He went in October 24 last year and to the best of our knowledge he hasn't had a drink since. That was "poor man's detox, as he called it. He served 49 of those 65 days. He came out and had another case pending in the County Court. Our attorney, who is in our church, knew the DA and the judge. They agreed he needed treatment more than additional jail time. They agreed if he would go to treatment they would give him credit toward his jail time. Well, he did not have insurance and who can afford treatment these days at \$10,000 to \$13,000 a month. He was already detoxed. He told people he needed a good environment. We found a Christian home in Milwaukee called Hope Street for recovering addicts. This is an environment where they had prayer and Bible study support everyday. So out of 100 days the judge let him serve 60 days there. They confronted him on his profanity and all of his habits. He made restitution on all of that.

He came home restored to the Lord. So, we saw God's discipline in all of that. It gave us hope that he was a true believer and he professed this. So I'd like to say to you that the second strength to us was our church. I've always tended to be vulnerable and believed in small group support. I could share with our church. They did not judge us as they knew that when he was home he was a model child and they did not judge us for what he got into in college. So the church pretty much knew his problem and prayed for us and became a support group. So I suggest prayer, corporate prayer and we all know we frequently say we can't do anything but trust, obey, and pray but God used that. I'd like to suggest that in the midst of that, becoming aware of Hope Street, sharing very openly with our congregation enhanced our ministry as they realized we were more sensitive to others and their pain. Do you ever feel as Pastors, people say: *"You've got it all together, you couldn't possibly understand what I am feeling."* As people knew what we were going through they began to open up more and more. Even alcoholics that were not in recovery yet began to come to us and we put them in touch with people in AA. We have a lot of recovering alcoholics in the church. So that and being invited to share here and John had asked us to go to our denominational annual conference to run a workshop put us in

touch with a few other people with similar struggles. It opened a whole new area of ministry for us. Five years ago we went back to Africa to investigate returning to teach there. They asked us "How soon can you come back?" and we said, "when we can leave David." I will be 65 in November, retire from our Church, and a year from now be teaching back in Africa in retirement. David got married ten weeks ago today. His wife is enough alike to understand him and enough different to complement him. We really think they are a good match. But they won't make it without following the Lord. We wish they were seeking the Lord a little more avidly. We can't control it. They are on their own. We are thankful for what God has done. I just have to say we are not alone, God is with us, we have one another, we have the church and I am thankful for this avenue of ministering to one another.