

My name is Robert S. I have been clean for over 14 years. I have been asked to share my story with you as an encouragement to those whom are still living in the throes of addiction, and those in the Phoenix House who are trying to fight it and overcome many of their day-to-day problems. Hopefully, this may help those around me that know me, so they can come to know me better.

It started fairly early on in childhood. Not knowing what was different about me from the rest of the kids in school, I originally thought something was wrong with me, that perhaps I was weirder than normal people. When approaching my parents about it, they just shrugged and said that it was a phase that I would grow out of it. Being the older sibling of a military family, every 2 to 3 years we would pack up and move to another location, sometimes overseas to Germany, but mostly here in the United States. Every time I moved to another location, I would go through the same "phase." After about the third or fourth time moving, I figured out (or, at least I thought I had) the reasoning behind my weirdness. I was under the assumption that because of my constant moving around, I always had to make new friends, and be liked.

And so, I started making new friends. Not many, but good close friends, or so I thought. Finding myself in many situations that most normal kids would not even think about getting into, I started to become a "juvenile delinquent." Not in a criminal sense, but in the mindset phase. Skipping class, hanging out with the undesirable element, taking long lunches because I didn't want to go back to school, things of that nature. My stepfather would punish me, but being a rebellious teenager, it didn't matter. He would continue punishing me, ranging from corporal punishment to actual physical abuse. It shut it out and continued to the things I wanted to do.

And then, a turn of events occurred. My stepfather passed away from a sudden heart attack at age 34, and then I thought, my life is changing: no more beatings, no more having things I like taken away from me, no more punishment of any kind, since my mother was not the one that did the punishing in the house, and then it dawned on me: I could do what I wanted and have not repercussions from it. So, after the funeral arrangements were made and all, I found myself moving once again to a small town in Virginia. I still did not quite fit in, but I didn't care, I was able to do what I wanted. My rebellious streak ran throughout high school, and while my mother did the best she could with punishment, it was no use: I had become the teenage delinquent that both my parents were trying to avoid. We had gotten into arguments on a regular basis, including shouting matches. My sister would hole herself up in her room, not wanting to hear it, but I was beyond caring about anyone except myself.

At some point in time, I realized that things were out of control, probably somewhere around my junior year in high school. At one changing point in time, it had become so bad that my own mother would lock me out of the house because of my actions. I remember sleeping on the porch one night, and when the next morning came, she had opened the door, and I immediately flew into a fit of rage. I remember raising my hand in anger, and then the sudden realization that I was no longer standing on the floor in our kitchen, because I had made her so upset with my actions that she literally jerked me up by my shirt with her left hand, and lifted me 6 inches off the floor. Astounded by this, I almost immediately came to my senses, and started crying, not knowing really knowing what I was doing, having that feeling of helplessness.

So, after that episode, we both agreed that I should seek counseling for anger management. The sessions we went to were both long and boring, but I didn't want to end up in jail or prison, so I did everything I could to make sure that each session was productive and thorough. After about a year and a half, my therapist finally came to the conclusion that there was nothing else to talk about, and pronounced me "cured." My mother had turned to religion for guidance, and was very successful in her respect. She became a devout non denominational Christian, believed in the Bible, went to prayer group meetings, and helped within the community whenever the church had a function. I tried to become more involved in the church, thinking that perhaps maybe this was my path that I was to take. I became an usher, helping those who needed assistance into the church, assisting with offering plates, the things that most normal ushers did.

Even then, it still was not enough. I finally would become rebellious again, not wanting to have anything to do with the church. On Sunday mornings, I would pretend to still be asleep whenever Mom would knock on my door, asking me if I was coming to church. I would grumble a "no" to her, and she would storm off, saying that God was going to punish me for my insolent behavior. I didn't care. I had come to the conclusion that God was already punishing me, and no amount of church going was going to save me.

Then, she suddenly started to become sick. No one could give a definite explanation to her about why she was sick. By this time, I had already graduated high school, and working at a gas station. She came down to the station one day, complaining of being sick all of the time. I saw by the look in her eyes that something was definitely wrong. I went in, and told my boss that I was taking her to the hospital; she was so bad that she couldn't even drive herself. I took her in, and after being the emergency room for about 45 minutes, the doctor came in and said it was her nerves. So, she quit working as a result, and things started to get better for her for a little while.

And then, the sickness returned. After numerous visits to the doctor, they finally said they didn't know what the problem was. By this time, I had quit working at the gas station, and started working at the local Wal-Mart as a cashier. The night after my birthday in 1995, I got a call from a friend of mine that she had gone to another hospital in Charlottesville, Virginia. Getting lost trying to get to the University of Virginia hospital, he had ended up at Martha Jefferson Hospital. After being there for only an hour, they had diagnosed her with 7 different types of cancer, and she was immediately admitted. He said that she needed me to be there as soon as possible.

Immediately, I went to my supervisor, explaining my situation. My supervisor graciously allowed me to leave, saying they would have someone come in to cover the rest of my shift. By the time, I had went to the back of the store and clocked out, my friend had already returned from Charlottesville, which was about 45 minutes away, picked me up, and we went back to Charlottesville as fast as his car would allow. Getting there in less than 30 minutes, I suddenly realized the seriousness of the situation. As I went upstairs to her room, I tried to brace myself as best I could for the situation.

No amount of preparation could have been sufficient for what I saw when I entered the room. My mother laying in the hospital bed, tubes dangling from her like spaghetti, the look in her eyes, it was

heartbreaking, and for the first time in my life, I really understood what was going on: she was dying. The look on her face, the paleness of her skin, the general appearance all pointed to the fact that she didn't have very much longer to live, and for the first time in several years, I started to cry. Not just the tears, but the wracking sobs, the numbness, the feeling of helplessness that I had felt when she fought to protect herself from me, but 10 times stronger. My friend helped me from the room, and when I reached the elevator to go back down, the doors opened and my oldest uncle was standing right in front of me. Seeing me, he immediately grabbed me from my friend, saying he had it covered, to go back to the room. We went downstairs to the cafeteria, and I immediately started pouring my heart out to him. All the things I had done, all the events that led up to her being there, everything I could think of that was relevant, thinking I had done this to her.

The next day, my work gave me the day off so I could go see her. When going back upstairs, not only was my uncle there, but so was my grandmother, my other two uncles, and my youngest aunt. My grandmother, whom I have always been able to talk to no matter how bad the situation, had already talked to the doctor: she had one week to live. No amount of chemotherapy or radiation was going to work for her situation. The best they could do was making her comfortable until it was time.

I spent the next three days with the rest of the family, who had come down from New York. Talking about things, how arrangements were being made, it all just happened so fast for me. On December 22, 1995, I had just returned from lunch break at work, and my supervisor came up to me and said that the store had received a phone call from my grandmother: it was time. I immediately called up my friend, he came to the store, picked me up, and we rushed off to the hospital. Once there, I ran to the elevator, jammed the button for her floor, and we went up. Once I reached her floor, our pastor was there: he told me she had just died 5 minutes earlier.

I rushed to the room, calling for her. She was laying there in bed, one eye half open. I dropped to the floor immediately, sobbing, wailing, beating on her to come back, but to no avail: it was really too late. I didn't want to move, but I felt hands picking me up off the floor, holding me close, as I was literally dragged to the elevator. Being helped out, my sobbing had subsided somewhat, but the pain and agony was still there: I couldn't even be there when she wanted me to, and I felt despair like I had not felt in many years. I could not return to work in my condition, so my work decided that my term of employment was up, since I was only a temporary employee for the holiday season. I didn't care at that point: I felt like a failure, failing to be able to be with my mother on her death bed, failing to be the person she wanted me to be, failing to be a real person at all, just going through the motions.

So, I turned to alcohol, numbing the pain and agony I felt, cursing myself mostly, but also those around me. It was the whole world's fault, doctors, family, friends, everybody. Depression sank in, and I drank more and more. Some people saw it, but most didn't. I learned very quickly how to do things in secret. Drinking led to marijuana, since it was something I could do to ease the pain. This seemed like what I was meant to do, and I did it very well.

This continued on for about a year, until I had a very brutal realization: I couldn't smoke marijuana anymore. I had gone over to a friend's house one night to indulge, and unbeknownst to me,

he had laced it with PCP, supposedly to add to the effect. I spent the night in his garage, throwing up violently, thinking I was going to die and there was nothing I could do about it: this was what I was meant to do, for all the pain and suffering that I had caused everyone else. The next morning, I woke up, walked to my house, where another friend of mine from high school had come by to check up on me. Being in the medical field, he saw my condition, and we went to the hospital.

I lay in the emergency room bed for over 4 hours, thinking that I was going to die in the hospital that couldn't help my mother, cursing them for their lack of care for their patients. During that time, without me knowing, the doctors had given me some sort of medication to combat the effects that the laced marijuana had induced. After those 4 hours, I came to my sense and realized what had happened: I had developed an allergic reaction to marijuana, induced by the PCP. I understood that any attempt to try to smoke it anymore would produce the same effects, and quite possibly kill me.

So, I turned to another choice: prescription medication. They were safe, they numbed the pain, and all I had to do was complain about some sort of pain in my body, and the doctors would prescribe them to me. Bouncing around between doctors was something I became very good at. Under this condition, I saw my life falling apart: losing the house to the estate, throwing away almost all of my possessions, letting the other ones start deteriorating without caring. I didn't deserve all of the things I had. I felt that it was my lot in life to be miserable and numb.

After losing the house, I moved into the only homeless shelter in town. Being there meant I couldn't drink or take narcotics, but I wanted to try to do something with my life at that point, because going around numb was not a way to live. Walking into the place, I see a familiar face: an old coworker from one of the many previous jobs. I remembered when we worked together; we would start drinking after the boss would leave for the day. Asking him how he managed to live there without drinking, he just simply replied that he started going to 12 step meetings. I became curious at that point, asking questions. He just simply said that if I wanted to know more about it, just show up.

So, I decided to go one night. Going up the steps of the local clubroom, I realized that was a LONG flight of steps. Stopping halfway up to catch my breath, he joking asked me if I needed a wheelchair. Looking at him, I told him that I needed to do this. Don't ask how it happened, but somehow, I made it to the top without collapsing. Once I got to the top floor, I thought that this was some sort of initiation into this place. Once I entered the room, I saw a bunch of people in there, having coffee and shooting the breeze with one another, and I'm thinking in my sick brain, what in the world have I walked myself into? Some of the people looked like they had been there for a VERY long time, and others looked like they never left the place. But yet once the meeting started, all of those initial assumptions went right out the door. People were clear concise, almost ritualistic in their nature, and I'm thinking that this is some sort of cult, and I'm going to be sacrificed for intruding.

It was a speaker meeting that night, and their guest speaker looked like a hippie crossed with a biker, and I'm thinking to myself that this guy must be someone else that was new, because he started sharing his story. I basically sat through the meeting in a daze, not really comprehending what was going on. Towards the end of the meeting, he said something that struck home for me: he said that if there

were any newcomers (meaning me) in the crowd, and they weren't sure that this was for them, to give it 90 days, and come to a meeting each day, and save a dollar each day, that if after 90 days we still didn't think we belonged, then we had 90 bucks to go out and get drunk with, and then come back and tell them if it was worth it.

Now this guy had my full attention. I knew he was not speaking to me directly, but somehow, his words hit home in a way that I had never experienced before. Call it what you may, but nevertheless, I decided to try out this "new way of life." When they did their chip system, I kind of hesitated at first, thinking that this was a way for people to laugh at me for being a newcomer. Once I saw a couple of other people get up for their respective chips, I noticed that there was no laughing, but lots of applause, so I figured that I'd get one the next night, since there really was no harm in getting one. But I didn't realize that they always went back to the first one in case of reservations. Once they announced the first one again, I didn't take a second thought: I just stood right up and walked up to pick this chip up. The next thing I know, there are people on their feet applauding for me, cheering and whooping for me, and I had a sense of joy I had never felt before, kind of a relief. After the meeting was over, many people came up to me, talking with me, giving me phone numbers, asking me to keep coming back.

And so I did. I went to 98 meetings in the first 90 days in the program, because I was sick, but not in a physical sense. This was something that a doctor could not really fix. And so, for the first time in my life, I felt like I really belonged to something important. During the first year, I tried for follow suggestions, take everything in at once, ask questions, and do what the program asked to stay sober, but that uneasy feeling returned, like something was still missing. Due to the nature of my work at the time (I became a truck driver), I started attending meetings less and less, claiming that I didn't know where there were any meetings at. And so, like most of the rest of us, I relapsed. In 1998, I was in Minnesota at the time, and was kind of in despair since my truck that I was delivering was in the shop for a coolant problem, and I decided to walk over to a local sports bar, thinking that I was ok to go in there, since I needed some decent food to eat. The next thing I know, I'm ordering alcohol, and realizing that I hadn't really learned anything.

The boss was with us on this trip, and I knew immediately that when I returned to the hotel, that I was busted. He was standing outside my room when I walked up, and I felt guilty about what I had done. There was no hiding it, he could tell by the look on my face. But instead of yelling at me, he simply told me to go into the room, and not to come out until the next morning. He took my key pass from me so that if I did decide to leave, I could not get back in, and told the receptionist to not issue another key for me. So I went to bed, feeling guilty about what I had done, realizing that all the time I had accumulated had just been thrown away, and started to feel that despair come over me again.

The next morning, at 6 a.m., he calls me on the motel room phone, asking me to join him for breakfast. I grumbled my ok, knowing my stomach would not handle any kind of food at this point since I had developed a major hangover. My head was hurting in the way that only an alcoholic can understand, so I figured that I would just drink some coffee while he and his fiancée had breakfast. He had no such notions. He told me to eat breakfast if I was to have any chance of working for him anymore. So, reluctantly, I ate breakfast, holding it down long enough to get back to the motel room.

Once that pain had passed, asked me to join him in his room. Once I got there, he was sitting at the desk they provided, and we had a nice long talk. He told me that since the truck was still not ready, that we would be staying there another night, and that I would be joining them for dinner, that this was not a request. By this time, the pain had started subsiding somewhat, and I told him what happened. He just told me that he was already aware of the situation, and to follow his instructions until we got back home. He gave me permission to be out of my room that night if I wanted to go swimming in the pool, but I was not to leave the hotel grounds without him present. I felt like a little kid again, but since he was giving me a chance to redeem myself, I understood why he did it.

Once we got back, he handed me my paycheck, and told me that I had 2 options: that I could take it and get drunk with it if I wanted, but if I did I would not work for him anymore. The other option was to hand him back the check to hold for me, and go back to meetings, and he would let me keep my job. I didn't even hesitate handing it back to him. I loved to drive for him, and I didn't want anything else to mess that up. Going back to the clubroom, I traversed those 36 steps yet once again, but having to catch my breath again for the first time in over a year. I realized at that point that drinking was not the problem: I was, and drinking was involved. So, I went to my sponsor before the meeting, and told him what happened. He just said that I did what I did because I wasn't really ready. And so, once again, I picked that first chip.

Realizing from other people that I hadn't done everything they asked me to do, I searched back through my previous year in my mind, trying to figure out what I hadn't done, but without success. Constantly calling my sponsor up about it, trying to find out from him what I had missed, he just kept saying that I will come to me. After about 4 1/2 months of racking my brain, I had finally figured out what I had missed: I hadn't worked any of the steps properly. I thought I had, but apparently, I had not done them wholeheartedly. And so, I began the process again, but with everything I had in me to do them right.

Once I reached the dreaded 4th step again, I stopped. I was thinking that there was no way I wanted to go through the horror again. But my sponsor just reminded me that unless it was thorough and honest, that I would never fully appreciate my recovery, and I would be doomed to repeat myself. So, with every ounce of courage I could muster, I finally went through the 4th step with him. It took up at least 4 pages of things that I could remember, whereas the first time, it only took up about a page and a half. I went through everything: from childhood up to the present time, holding nothing back. It took the better part of about 4 hours for us to get through the whole thing. Once I was finished, I felt relief, that finally everything was out in the open, thinking that this was it: he was going to look at me and call me hopeless, but he surprised me at that point by saying that I had a chance. He told me to take it home and burn it in the fireplace.

In 2003, I decided to move from Virginia to where I live now in North Carolina. By this time, I had switched meetings from AA to NA. Coming to NA, I realized that it filled in a lot of the holes I felt were still missing. Doing another 4th step with a different sponsor, I didn't hold anything back this time either, and the results were the same: take the paper that I had written everything down on and burn it. I didn't have a fireplace, but where I was living at the time, I had a trash pile in the back yard, so I burned it

there. My roommates didn't realize my addictions, and either they didn't care or they wanted to flaunt it in front of me. After living with them for about 4 months, I realized that it was time for me to move on, because I saw that I was slipping back into my old ways again. And so, I sought help elsewhere.

When I came to the Phoenix House in 2003, I was on the verge of relapse again: not going to meetings, not working steps, not talking to anyone. When I came into the place, it was small: two desks in the outer office, an inner office, and a meeting room. The person I talked with explained to me the conditions of staying at the house: meetings at least once a day, no key to the house for the first 90 days, and I had to have an escort for the first 30 days. I shared a room with another guy, and we had community areas that we were responsible for cleaning at least once a week. It almost felt like a prison, but with no bars on the windows, but I was determined to stay clean. I followed their suggestions, and as a result, the restrictions were lifted.

For two years I stayed there, attending meetings, following the rules, helping out with transportation once I showed that I was trustworthy enough. By this time, my commercial driver's license had lapsed beyond the point that the state would honor a renewal, so I set myself back into the world of "normal" work. For the two years I was there, I applied myself as best as I could, working, attending meetings, follow house rules, helping other clients along so they could be successful as well. When I was asked to leave the program, I didn't think I was ready to face the outside world alone, but the director told me that not only was I ready, but if there were any problems, I was free to call them anytime.

And so, with a bit of reluctance, I returned to the "normal" world. I got an apartment, was working full time, and was starting to be successful instead of just surviving. I had found employment at a local tire shop not too far from my apartment, and started working there. I was making money, paying bills on time, and had started a relationship with a very nice lady. On occasion, whenever I had an issue to deal with, I would call the director at the Phoenix House and asked her opinion on the issue. She was never rude, but always to the point, blunt, and honest. It hurt sometimes, but I knew that there was a reason for the exactness of what she said.

So about 5 years after graduating from the Phoenix House program, I approached her with the idea of going back into truck driving again. Her response to me kind of threw me off track, because I was thinking that she was going to tell me that it was a bad idea. She just simply asked me what took me so long in figuring out what I'm supposed to be doing. Apparently, she had seen that I was not happy with what I was doing, and was becoming miserable as a result. My girlfriend was apparently talking to her during this period, but didn't know how to approach the subject. The director told me the she could put me in touch with some agencies that could help me out. I went through those agencies, doing what they asked, and I finally got my commercial permit, but not the actual license itself.

I ran into a couple of brick walls at that point, due to state guidelines for commercial licenses, but I was not about to give up. I noticed for the first time after graduating that I was not only supposed to be a truck driver, that I was destined to owning my own trucking company. After a lot of red tape and jumping through hoops and finding other sources, I finally came to the decision that I would have to go

to another truck driving school to get everything I needed. I saved up enough money to get a plane ticket to a truck driving school in Texas, and after calling the company involved with it, I was qualified to attend.

Once I came to the truck driving school, I recognized some very familiar smells. Some might call them hazards; others would call them something that would be disinfected with Lysol. But to me, they were the smells that I had come back to the thing that I truly loved: driving a truck. Going through the school, I almost aced every test they gave me, and my driving instructor asked what I was doing at a school since I knew how to drive a truck already. I had to explain that I had let my license lapse for almost 8 years, and that since new laws had come into effect since I had left the road, I needed to be updated. Her response was that if I had been gone 8 years, and could drive the truck as well as I was doing, that I should never leave it again.

Today, I am co-owner of a trucking company. We currently have two trucks that are about to be paid off within the next year, and our plans are to have at least 10 within the next five years. On my time off, I still go to the Phoenix House to help with driving when needed, or to talk to some of the clients if they have issues with things, but I realize that without the help of AA, NA, and most importantly, the Phoenix House, I would not be where I am today. I love to be on the open road, but I also know that there are times that I need to regrind myself, and the Phoenix House and its director are the ones that are still helping me there. Am I perfect? Not by a long shot. I still get help from them from time to time with issues, but the help I get now is much less than I got when I was there, because they have helped me grow since graduating from there. It is possible to achieve your dreams: you just first of all have to know what they are, and second, to do the right things to get to them. Thank you to the director for allowing me to share my story with you, and hopefully, it will show you that you can do anything you want as long as you set your mind to it and follow suggestions that are given to you.

Sincerely,

Robert Sidebotham