

When Gary McNeil returned home from a business trip, all he found was a note.

McNeil, a risk architect for First Texas Risk Advisors, said the note was from his wife, who had left with their daughter.

McNeil said he struggled with alcoholism, and his family leaving caused him to seek help.

"That's where I said, I've obviously driven my life into a ditch and I don't know how to get it out," he said. "That's what drove me to get help."

He said he immediately called the Alcoholics Anonymous hotline for help, but bringing his family back would take work.

Charlene McNeil, Gary's wife, said repairing their relationship took time even after Gary attended AA.

"It was just slowly unpacking that baggage," she said, "because not only did he create it, but I created it too."

Gary said he did not know he had a problem with alcohol. He said his addiction grew from behaviors and feelings from when he was younger.

Born and raised in Arlington, Texas, he said he was an only child and felt like an outsider in high school. He said he wanted to be part of the popular crowd, and he thinks most kids in high school feel like outsiders, including the popular kids.

Gary said his battle with alcohol began while partying as a member of the Sigma Chi Fraternity at Texas Tech.

"I did all that in college and that is where I started," he said. "Later it just kind of grew into something much different."

He said he moved to Houston after college, met his wife Charlene, and married her two years later.

Gary and Charlene said they enjoy being outdoors, especially when cycling or skiing.

Charlene said she began cycling frequently and had quit drinking to improve her stamina. When she quit, she said she realized her husband's use of alcohol was excessive.

"That became real apparent in what he was doing," she said, "because he was drinking all the time."

She said her husband's alcohol use became worse and began to change his behavior.

"He began to tell me how I wasn't doing things right," she said, "I wasn't parenting right, I didn't have my priorities straight."

Gary said his behavior did not change when he was drinking, but when he was not drinking. He said trying to offset the lows in his life with alcohol caused other aspects of his life to get worse.

Gary said it was not until his wife and daughter left that he found help.

"Somewhere deep inside I knew that I wasn't living the way I was supposed to," he said, "but it took her to push me over the edge."

When Charlene returned home to Gary, she said she gave him 90 days to control his addiction. She said her husband began to overcompensate in other areas of his life to offset his alcohol use.

"He went extreme on reading the Big Book and reading the Bible," she said. "It was just like this extreme personality again, but it was over in another direction."

Gary said God was the only thing that helped him overcome his addiction and repair his relationship with his wife. He said he considers his day of salvation the same as his sobriety date.

Despite being raised in a Christian home, Gary said his actions did not reflect a Christian attitude. He said God made big improvements in his life and changed his heart as well as his wife's.

After attending several AA meetings, Gary said he helped start Celebrate Recovery, a 12-step program based on Christianity, at church. He said all 12-step recovery programs involve a higher power, but Celebrate Recovery clearly defines the higher power as the Jesus of the Bible.

Greg Wells said he helped Gary establish the Celebrate Recovery program at 121 Community Church in Grapevine, Texas.

"He was really the main person that was instrumental in getting it up and running," Wells said.

Wells, a licensed professional counselor and friend of Gary, said Celebrate Recovery is not limited to substance abuse. Wells said his personal addiction to pornography led to the interest in starting Celebrate Recovery.

"It's a Christ-centered 12-step program," Wells said, "designed to help anyone struggling with hurt, habit or hang-up."

Recovering alcoholic Gary McNeil said Celebrate Recovery addresses many types of behaviors and addictions, including overeating, pride, sexual addictions, and codependency.

"That's the cool part about the programs in Celebrate Recovery," he said, "is that they're not about giving advice. It's about walking together side by side with somebody else who's got the same kind of issues."

Licensed counselor Wells said 12-step programs are different because of the community involved. As a counselor and recovering addict, he said community is key to recovery.

"You are accepted, or the person that's struggling with the addiction is accepted right where they are," he said, "not that their addiction is accepted, but you know there's no judgment."

Gary said he has to monitor his alcohol use month by month, calling it a daily reprieve.

He said he would not give any advice to another alcoholic unless they were willing to seek help.

"I would give some advice," he said, "but it would have to be very specific to what they're asking me, and the only time I would give it is when they ask."

Gary said he continues to lead Celebrate Recovery and recognizes God as the only substitute for his addiction.

Today, Gary said, he enjoys riding his bike and skiing. He and his wife hope to build a house in Durango, Colo.

Gary's wife Charlene said she grew up in Creed, Colo., on the other side of the mountain from Durango.

"We've just fallen in love with the little town of Durango," she said, "so that's why we want to move there."

Despite his struggle with alcohol, Gary said his family, faith and prayer helped him admit he was addicted to alcohol. He said the recovery process helped him learn that anyone could be an alcoholic.

"All alcoholics live under bridges, have paper bags they drink out of, and have overcoats or trench coats," he said.

"That was my thought process about what an alcoholic looks like. I learned that wasn't really true."

Sidebar

Drinking alcohol in college is a popular social activity for many students.

Gary McNeil said his drinking habits in college led to his alcoholism later in life.

"I drank just like most of the rest of the kids do in college," he said. "I got drunk on Friday nights like everybody."

A risk architect at First Texas Risk Advisors, McNeil said the constant partying on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights started his tendency to overindulge.

As a member of the Sigma Chi Fraternity at Texas Tech, he said most of his fraternity brothers drank, but not all did. He said some slowed down their drinking after college.

"I think a lot of kids in college start to do that," he said, "and then they sort of back off as they get into the real world. I kind of accelerated into the real world."

McNeil said college-drinking habits can turn into addictions like his, but some stop. He said he was unable to process the highs and lows of alcohol use during college.

"It does for a lot of people, just become a habit," he said, "that then becomes, over time, very destructive."

McNeil said he knows which of his fraternity brothers still drink. On one occasion, he said, he saw a former fraternity brother begin drinking at noon.

Today, McNeil said, his daughter attends college and is a member of a sorority. He says his experience with alcoholism led to his daughter's increased awareness of the effects of alcohol.

Charlene McNeil, Gary's wife, said she thinks their daughter's involvement with recovery has helped her college experience and attitude towards alcohol.

"She's probably better educated," she said, "from the standpoint of what addiction is and alcoholism is than most kids are at her age."

Gary said that since college he has gone to Alcoholics Anonymous and been sober since 2001. He said he recognizes his family as the reason he gave up his addiction.

"I just got really lucky," he said, "otherwise, I could have gone down a whole different road."

JOUR 2410-502

May 11

News 6

Author:

Katie Penkert - katie.penkert@ttu.edu

Sources:

Gary McNeil - gary.mcneil@firsttexas.com

Charlene McNeil - gary.mcneil@firsttexas.com

Greg Wells - greg.wells@240cc.com