

I Was A Teen Alcoholic

The Number One drug turn-on among teens today is alcohol. Half of the heavy users among teens are likely to become alcoholics, and it is estimated that there are already 450,000 teen alcoholics in the country.

Recent Parent Teachers Association surveys gauge that 75 percent of high school youth now drink, and that more than half of those have serious alcoholic problems.

During the past ten years, arrests of girls eighteen and younger who were intoxicated by liquor have more than tripled. Arrests of boys in the same age group have jumped almost two and a half times, according to Dr. Morris Chafetz, director of the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse. Dr. Chafetz also asserts that a third of all high school students state that they drink with regularity, while only 14 percent of teen-agers are total abstainers. (Among adults 32 percent don't drink at all.)

Alcoholics Anonymous, a leading self-help organization, says that they currently have twenty-five groups oriented to young people. A year ago there were only twelve such groups, five years ago none. (Columbus Hospital, in New York City, has just expanded its alcohol treatment center to offer help to adolescent alcoholics, the first such program in America.)

Many young people are turning from hard drugs to alcohol, particularly beer and wine, states a recent report in the "Christian Science Monitor." Sales of "pop" fruit-flavoured wines are up from three million gallons in 1968 to 33 million gallons last year, and these wines are consumed almost entirely by young people.

Following is the true personal story of one teen-age alcoholic.

My name is Cathy C., and I am an alcoholic. I started to drink when I was fifteen. My first drink was in the park near my house, where a number of older neighbourhood teen-agers used to gather regularly, to socialize and drink beer.

One day one of the boys offered me a can of beer. I had always been painfully shy. In the past I'd felt ignored and left out by this group of older kids. But as soon as I drank the beer everything seemed wonderful. I was no longer shy; I couldn't talk to people, dance and sing. Everybody seemed to like me and find me fun to be with.

This was going to be it, I thought. Whenever the opportunity

arose, I was going to drink. The taste meant nothing to me, though at first I stuck to milder stuff like beer and wine. It was the effect I was after, and the effect was wonderful as far as I was concerned!

In the beginning it was only weekend drinking. I soon graduated from beer and wine to screwdrivers (vodka and orange juice) which tasted better to me and had an even quicker effect in getting me high.

I had always done well in school, and during that first year of strictly weekend drinking I managed to keep up my usual good grades. But by my sophomore year my drinking began to increase, and my marks started to go down

drastically.

I was part of a whole gang of kids who got together for parties or just casual drinking in the afternoon. Not all of them were that interested in alcohol. About half were strictly marijuana smokers, or were into pills. I tried pot and pills, but they just weren't my sort of high. Give me a six-pack or a can of those prepared screwdrivers then just becoming popular and I was happy. Though my parents weren't heavy drinkers, they did keep a small supply of liquor on hand for social occasions. Before long I was into this too.

By the time I was sixteen, at the end of my sophomore year, I was doing so badly at the parochial school I attended that I was asked to leave. But I was glad to go to the high school which was much larger, had less supervision, and was much less strict about attendance. Besides, most of my new friends attended that school.

I got in with what I considered to be the real "in" crowd, something I felt I could never have done before I started drinking. None of us really went to school. We would just check into the home room in the morning; then we'd get together and find out whose parents would be away that afternoon and go there and party. I don't think we attended school more than one third of the time that year.

At least 20 percent of the students were involved in this kind of thing, but I guess my closest friends were the real troublemakers. None of them wanted to be in school in the first place. They all wanted to quit, even if they had no plans for the future. At this point I'd say that at least half of the gang were still on drugs, but I stayed strictly away from that, not only because I didn't like it, but because of the

danger with the law. I figured I was being pretty smart to stay with liquor, which was not only safer from a legal point of view but also cheaper and easier to get. Age was no barrier to getting alcohol, though most of the taverns were pretty strict about ID cards. There were always a few phony ID cards being passed around, and there was seldom a problem buying the stuff in supermarkets or liquor stores. If a liquor store wouldn't sell to us, we could always recruit an older person to go in and get a bottle for us - just tell him we were planning a party or something.

That was the thing about drinking. People generally approved of it - they were glad that at least we weren't on drugs. Alcohol was familiar, something they could understand. Even the cops weren't too tough if they found us with booze. Of course, possession of liquor by underage kids is not a crime.

Toward the end of my junior year my behavior came to the attention of school authorities. They sent for my parents and I had many conferences with the school psychiatrist to find out why I was skipping so many classes. My father had been aware that I was in danger of becoming a problem drinker from the start. A year before, when I had been out until two in the morning and had come home obviously tipsy, my father had been very concerned. When I sobered up he took me aside and said: "Kathy, you are one of those people who should never drink. You change drastically when you are drinking. Your personality is completely different."

I remember answering him "Yes, but the change is for the Better! I don't feel shy. Its terrific!"

One day, when I was sixteen, I found out that my mother wasn't going to be home that afternoon so I had the gang over and we had a

groovy party, swinging on beer, screwdrivers and wine. But even though I was to some extent the life of the party, there was one guy there who wouldn't pay any attention to me. I am not sure what made me do it, maybe something I had seen in a movie or on TV, but I went into the bathroom, took a razor blade from my father's medicine chest, and with two quick movements slit both wrists. I really had no intention of killing myself. It was just a play for this boy's attention, and when I reappeared at the party, bleeding heavily, it certainly got attention.

Of course that was the end of the party, since I was rushed to the hospital. I know that I would never have done that if I had not been drunk out of my mind. When I was drunk, I didn't even feel the pain. I was sent to a private psychiatric hospital for two weeks as a result of this incident. When I returned to school, everyone seemed to know what had happened. I told my father I couldn't go back to school because I was sure everyone was making fun of me. I went with him to the guidance counselor, and she agreed that my parents might as well take me out of school since I was getting nothing from it. The next season my parents, who had always hoped I would go to college, enrolled me in a business school. That was the year I turned seventeen. Now that I was no longer in high school, my life began to revolve more and more around bars. But I was still not aware that I had a problem; I felt I could quit drinking anytime I wanted to. This was the year I met Peter, my first serious boy friend.

Peter would drink occasionally, but he was not part of my crowd, and he thought my excess drinking was caused by the people I associated with. He introduced me to his crowd - much

straighter than the group I went with and drinkers only on the weekends or special occasions.

The business school I was going to encouraged me to take courses that would help me get better jobs when I got out, such as accounting and business English. But in two months I had dropped all courses except typing. It seemed to be the only one I could cope with when I had a hangover, which was often. By now my parents were deeply troubled, but I still refused to take their advice and even told them that unless they locked me up and chained me to the bed, there was nothing they could do about it.

Then I started to go in for morning drinks. I remember sitting in a bar one night and saying: "I'm going to have a beaut of a hangover tomorrow. The noise of those typewriters is going to drive me crazy!"

One of the fellows answered, "Try a drink in the morning. It'll bring you around."

So I figured: "This is marvellous! Now I can drink and not even feel sick the next day!"

Toward the end of my seventeenth year, I had my first blackouts - periods when I couldn't remember anything that happened. I was scared at first but I was still going with Peter, who was a very dependable guy, so I knew I'd get home all right.

Just after I turned eighteen Peter was drafted. I decided I would be a faithful girl and go out only with my girl friends or stay home at night and write letters to Pete. So instead of going to bars to get drunk, I would drink alone in my room.

I got my first job about that time, and it was terrific. I didn't have to depend on my folks for money or on my boy friends to but me booze.

But I was hurting myself

desperately, without realizing it. I would go out with my girl friends on Wednesday nights, and the blackouts were getting worse, only now I didn't have Peter to protect me; often I didn't know how I got home or who had taken me there. I was still very straight and religious and I worried what might happen to me some night during one of those blackouts.

Up to this point I didn't drink at work. I knew this was different from school and that if I drank I'd be fired. But one day I decided I would just have a drink to break up the boredom at lunch time. I took a bottle to the office, but I had this terrific hangover and felt I couldn't wait until lunch. By five I was in a blackout and couldn't remember anything. I know that I behaved very foolishly at the office and apparently fell down a flight of stairs and had to be taken to the emergency ward at the hospital. When my father came to get me, he said; "Kathy, you must go to Alcoholics Anonymous. Nobody drinks the way you do. You shouldn't be drinking alone or hiding bottles."

By then even I began to realize I had a bad problem. But I hated the idea of A.A. There weren't many young people in A.A. then and I was sure it would be some kind of Salvation Army evangelistic crew. I finally agreed to go to my local chapter meeting, but to do that I had to get drunk.

The next day they sent two people over to see me and even arranged to have a twenty-three year old woman talk to me, as she was closer to my age. But she was married and had a baby. I was single. What would happen to my social life if I stopped drinking? The parties? The bars? I couldn't face giving up alcohol.

The next two years were a hazy nightmare. I became a "periodic drinker," drinking one week out of

the month. I lost my job and drifted into a series of temporary jobs. The minute I got a paycheck, I was off on a binge. I began to let everything go - even my dress and appearance. Sometimes I didn't bathe for days. Peter got out of the army and saw that his girl had become a full-fledged, full-time drunk. This romance eventually ended.

Even then, I didn't consider myself an alcoholic. I felt all I had to do was learn to drink like a lady and control myself.

I did attend a few more A.A. meetings, but I wasn't impressed. I got sick and was hospitalized several times. The thought of suicide crossed my mind, but I was afraid of failing at it. Besides, I'm a Roman Catholic and my religion was one of the main things that kept me from going that route.

At my family's urging I even went to a psychiatrist. He helped me with many problems, but not with the drinking, because I wouldn't let him.

I really didn't think much of myself at the time. My self-esteem was at a low point, and the only way I seemed to be able to avoid my feelings of self-hatred was to drink. My family life was miserable. It reached the stage where the family was ashamed to have guests come to the house when I was around. I began to wake up in the morning sick and nauseated. I was throwing up constantly and losing weight.

Finally I collapsed again, at the end of my physical endurance. This time somebody recommended that I be sent to the Freeport Hospital, in Freeport, Long Island - one of the few in the country devoted to the treatment of alcoholics. I was carried in on a stretcher.

In the hospital I was put to bed and given a complete physical examination. It was determined that I was in a severe state of

malnutrition - my weight had dropped to 85 pounds from my normal 110, largely because during my drinking bouts I simply had no interest in eating. I was also suffering from vitamin deficiencies, particularly of B-12, which is the first to be destroyed by alcohol. I was put on a high-protein, high-calorie diet, given massive injections of B-12 until my bottom was sore, and given high-potency vitamins orally too. My liver showed signs of damage, but the doctor felt it would easily recover.

During the first few days I was also given a mild tranquilizer to help me cope with the shakes and withdrawal symptoms. But this was quickly discontinued.

"Alcoholics, above all, should avoid any sort of tranquilizer or stimulant. Their bodies have built up a high tolerance for drugs and they tend to increase dosage when they are troubled," I was told by hospital director Dr. Frank Herzlin. "This puts them right back into the alcohol habit in short order."

Patients are usually ambulatory when they are admitted to Freeport, and all admissions are voluntary - nobody is committed, as they might be to a mental institution. In my case I was on my feet in two days and encouraged to take my meals with the others. I had pictured the patients as being "Bowery bum" types, but I could not have been more wrong. Most were attractive and well spoken. Though at twenty-one I was the youngest at the hospital, a number of patients were under thirty.

I was then entered in the educational program, which consisted first of orientation lectures to explain what alcoholism is and what it can do to you. There were three of these a day.

This was followed by another series of lectures for an hour and

a half every morning, seven mornings a week. Afternoons were devoted to group therapy and individual counseling sessions. I was soon made to realize that I was not like other people, that I had a severe reaction to alcohol and could never be a "social drinker."

To me alcohol was, in effect, an allergy. I was told that the only way I would be able to stay sober, once I was discharged, was to join an A.A. group, and I attended several sessions which were handled by outside A.A. volunteers. Much time was spent trying to build up the patients' "self-esteem" - to convince them that being an alcoholic was not a sign of a weak or evil character but a condition that could be treated, like diabetes, though not ever cured.

I was started on a family program and my parents, brother and sister were invited to attend what we called the FOG sessions (Family Orientation Group). There my family was given lectures similar to my own orientation course, explaining what alcoholism is and how I should be treated. They were encouraged to join Al-Anon, an organization specially for the families of alcoholics. One of the important points stressed was that the families should not disrupt their entire lives because one of them was an alcoholic, but must learn to start living for themselves. Sometimes after hearing the orientation lectures, other members of the family would realize that they too were alcoholics and apply for a course of treatment.

Altogether there were twenty-five different programs in one week for the alcoholic patients, including films, group and private therapy, rap sessions and lectures. We were also given a complete physical checkup every day. I know of no case in which any of the patients tried to smuggle in drinks

or have any alcohol at this period. They had all been too close to disaster.

Treatment at Freeport is usually for one week. This costs \$405 and is allowable on Blue Cross, but since I had no regular job at the time I was admitted, the cost had to be picked up by my family.

I finally left Freeport after two weeks, restored in physical and mental health, and convinced I could and must stay sober.

I was able, after a few months, to start another relationship with a boy I had known in high school. He knew of my illness and was confident we could fight it together. This did much to help my self-esteem.

But it was hard to stay sober. I still couldn't realize that in my case, I could not drink at all. Shortly after I left Freeport, I took a bottle of Vodka to my room, just to lift me out of the blues. I fell off the wagon with a bang, and within two weeks I was in almost as bad shape as when I'd first arrived at Freeport. I agreed to return for further treatment and was reminded of what I had been told so many times in the hospital and at A.A. meetings. When you go back to drink, you don't go back to the beginning; you return to the point where you last left off.

This time I cleared the hospital in one week, convinced

that I would really stay sober forever.

I had another scare not long afterward while I was having some dental work done. The dentist had given me the usual dose of Novocain and started confidently to drill, when I let out a shriek of pain.

I had forgotten one of the warnings in the lectures at Freeport. If you are given anesthetics, you must always warn the doctor or dentist that you are a recovered alcoholic. Alcoholics often develop such a special chemistry with regard to drugs that they have been known to come suddenly out of anesthesia even during surgery!

I have finally learned that I can cope with my illness by facing it day by day, with the help of my family, my boy friend and Alcoholics Anonymous. I've learned to love waking up not feeling sick.

I took and passed a high school equivalency test and have now passed entrance exams for a local university, which I plan to attend next semester.

Paul, my new boy friend, loves and understands me. Before, I never believed anyone would love me sober. Now I don't think anyone could love me any other way.

I give thanks to God, the Freeport Hospital and Alcoholics Anonymous for giving me back a life that nearly ended before it began.