

## My Last Call For Alcohol...

My “last call for alcohol” was during the second week of January, 1985. I was exhibiting for Western Technologies, my contact lens distributorship, at a CLAO (Contact Lens Association of Ophthalmologists) convention in San Diego. A typical convention for me was to be really sharp and focused on the first day and then to drink and party excessively the first night and each night thereafter, with declining performance for the duration of the convention - and probably bad breath and appearance as well. I was a functioning drunk with declining function as the conventions progressed.



Gin, my poison of choice (or was it my choice of poison?)

Returning to our Trabuco Canyon home after the San Diego convention, I was hung over and must have still had a lot of alcohol in my system. Anyway, I didn't feel like having the gin and tonics that my wife Peggy (Wells, '64) and I usually had every evening. I usually drank 5 or 6 “G & Ts”, weighted heavily in favor of the “Gs” and Peggy drank maybe half as many, along with our Winstons (“taste good like a cigarette should”). I think I drank to soften the edges and blur the clarity of reality. But this time I mixed Peggy her usual drink and I drank just tonic, naturally with a twist of lime (to discourage scurvy, so we said). I continued this practice for a week or so and found that not only I didn't miss the alcohol, but that I always felt better in the morning and could see and think more clearly.

Then a couple of weeks later I was with a friend in the San Fernando Valley and was invited to tag along to an AA meeting. I went, not knowing what to expect, and found that the AA meeting was populated with guys (mostly) just like me – middle-aged executives who drank too

much alcohol to the detriment of their work and relationships. I went a month without alcohol, went to a second AA meeting, then went another month. I found an unexpected joy and clarity in being sober. Since 1985 I have not had a drop of alcohol other than the occasional "less than .5% alcohol" non-alcoholic beer. I had finally discovered that alcohol created a ceiling on everything I was doing.

My whole life changed. I saw things more clearly, both literally and figuratively. I was able to focus on my relationships and business efforts more clearly. I saw that if the future was to be different than the past, which for several years had not been great, I would have to change what I was doing.

Change I did. During the first few months of 1985, I gave up drinking, decided to close Western Technologies, the contact lens distributorship that had been struggling (probably at least partly due to my drinking) since 1982, reconnected with Lael with whom I had fallen in love 14 years earlier in Boston, decided to leave the relationship with Peg who then understandably kicked me out of the house and moved back to Connecticut with the kids; lost many of my cherished belongings in a garage fire; and most sadly for me, separated from my son Nathan (Hamilton,'97) and my daughter Celia (Wells,'92) with a strong feeling of guilt and remorse, the unintended consequence of all the above.

I had not been a good husband or father and when Peg sold the house and moved to her mother's home in Darien, CT, it should have been no surprise that I was alienated and estranged from my kids. Thankfully over the years Celia and I have repaired our relationship which is now wonderful. Nathan and I have had extreme difficulty putting our relationship back together but we keep trying. Nathan is now 52 and has had his own issues with alcohol that he has worked to put behind him, going to AA twice a day for several years.

Where did this problem with alcohol come from? Many in our family have had untreated and unresolved alcohol addiction problems: Grandfather Joel Stockard, his son my Uncle Bill Stockard, his daughter my Aunt Joanie and her husband Uncle George Sweasy and their son my cousin David Sweasy, all drank to excess and died young. My mother Louise, Bennington,'36) and father (Bill Vick, Hamilton, '36) had sherry every night, though never to excess that I can remember. But many in our family seemed to have the gene that made alcohol very attractive to us and put the monkey on our backs.

I started drinking the summer before I started as a freshman at Hamilton College, in 1960. I was 17. The legal drinking age in New York back then was 18, so 17 was pretty close. After attending a strict Anglican prep school, getting to college was a real door opener. There were no rules about alcohol - we could have as much as we wanted, whenever and wherever (although I never saw anyone drinking in class). But in our dorm rooms, OK; on campus, why not; in the fraternity houses, a given; at house parties, of course! We drank beer mostly, kegs and kegs and kegs of beer. Mostly Utica Club because they delivered kegs and all the fraternity houses had beer taps in our basements. We had 3 house party weekends a year: fall, winter, and spring. They were wild, fun weekends filled with girls from afar (Hamilton was a men's

college with 600 men, no women), that started on Friday and lasted until Sunday afternoon when the girls left to get back to their schools. There were 11 fraternities, each with its own house. On Friday and Saturday nights of house party weekends several houses would have rock & roll bands. Each house would stock an ample supply of kegs for the weekend, typically houses with the bigger parties and dance floors (Alpha Delt, DKE, PsiU, Sigma Phi, Chi Psi) would order 20-30 or more kegs. Everyone was welcome. The highlights of house party weekends were Sunday morning gin and juice parties at Theta Delt, accompanied by a rock & roll band, and the Stumplifter (grapefruit juice and vodka) parties at Chi Psi. I associated alcohol with having a great time, dancing, sex, and rock & roll. All things good, right? After all, isn't this what we came to college for?

After graduating from Hamilton in 1964 I joined the USAF and what did I find there? Happy hour (half price drinks) every Friday with a rock & roll band at the officers' club. Perfect! The party continued and became habitual: cocktail "hour" every night starting at about 5 PM, continuing through dinner and into the evening from the USAF in 1964 until January 1985. Why stop! For 21 years we drank sherry (in the USAF years - it was cheap) and when overseas gin & tonics every evening - Gilbey's gin was \$1.15 for a 40 oz. bottle - no taxes!. On Friday nights I frequented whichever bar was the current hot spot and, more often than not, closed the bar and drove home, sometimes even to my own. I was very lucky not to have had a car accident or killed someone, or to have been shot by Peg, as I was surely DUI every Friday night. Even though I was a "functioning" drunk, I blame my poor job performance, job loss, carousing, unfaithfulness, shattering a family, and estrangement from my children on my addiction to alcohol.

In drunk-speak, I hit bottom around 1980 and stayed there until 1985. In 1980 we were living in a tract house across the street from the railroad tracks in Huntington Beach (yes, Surf City, USA, but we didn't surf; I don't recall ever going to the beach). It was a nice house for us and had a pool which the kids loved. Peg and I were struggling with our relationship and my job prospects were iffy to say the least. The company (Sauflon International) that had brought us to California had folded and I was offered a job as marketing manager for the Medical Optics Center, the division of American Hospital Supply that had acquired Sauflon in return for future royalties. The situation at home led me to self-medicate with lots of gin and tonics. So we decided that another change of venue might help. We were pretty screwed up with no direction to our lives and really needed therapy but I rejected the idea of couples or any therapy. Thinking that a move to a new location might solve everything, we decided to sell the house and Peg would move with the kids to Savannah, GA to see how she liked it there. We didn't acknowledge we were separating but in essence it was a separation. Peggy rented a house on Tybee Island, GA and I moved into a 14-foot trailer in a slummy trailer park along an estuary (i.e. swamp) in Newport Beach, CA. No running water or electricity in the trailer, a scummy public shower, and a view over the river to a few oil wells. I had a battery operated radio and a kerosene lantern, and slept in a sleeping bag. It was winter and rainy, and the trailer was cold and damp. This was definitely the bottom for me and the lowest I have ever been in my adult life. Reflecting on this, I can't believe that I'd sunk this low.



Jon's 14-foot trailer in Newport Beach, CA

I don't blame the ruin of Peg's and my marriage solely on alcohol, but it definitely was a contributing factor. Peg and I had been good friends and lovers since we met at college in 1963. We had shared great times traveling to and living in interesting places (Philippines, W. Germany, South Africa, etc.) and doing things together. But I had never grown beyond adolescence, wanting to party whenever I was on my own. For all the 20 years of our marriage I would create situations where I could get away from home, drink and meet women. I had never really gotten over the mentality that I could do whatever I wanted without regard for anyone else. Alcohol freed and condemned me to a life of being absent, unfaithful, extremely selfish and self-centered.

When I stopped drinking for a few months and reflected on my life and relationship, I saw my own destructive behavior in the past and an uncertain future if I continued to do the same things.

When I reconnected with Lael in Boston in April of 1985, fourteen years after our brief (and alcohol-fueled) and affectionate love affair, I wanted a change and she did as well, as her life had not been a happy one due to the impact of alcohol on her relationships. We were both ripe for a change and latched on to each other with the hopes for a more satisfying, productive and stable life, in spite of the family trauma and risks involved. And so, it came to pass, at the expense of our former mates and children, that Lael and I have lived happily and alcohol-free ever since.

Giving up booze saved my life and allowed me to have a new start that has been immensely rewarding: a happy marriage and stable home life; a focused and successful career, increased earnings and savings, an excellent relationship with my wife and daughter, improved mental and physical health, and the ability to interact in and support our community and various charities. I

am very proud of the fact I have not had a drink for over 40 years and am happy to discuss our experience with alcohol with anyone who wants to talk about it.

I am hopeful that one day my relationship with Nathan. damaged due to the shocks and aftershocks of my divorce and our mutual addiction to alcohol, will someday be repaired as a result of our mutual abstinence.

Hope springs eternal.