

The invisible alcoholic

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Another alcoholic, who requested that his name not be mentioned, said he denied his problem because he fit none of the common alcoholic patterns.

"I never drank out," he said, "I never missed work, I never hit anyone, I was never in legal trouble and I never had alcohol-related health problems."

Another man said he didn't know how he hid his drinking problem but he must have done it well because he was married three times—to the same woman.

Self-deceit begins early in an alcoholic's life, Fleming said. In his case, he was only 16.

The oldest of eight children, Fleming said that when his father died he quit school and got a job to supplement his family's only income—a monthly \$62.52 Social Security pension.

"I didn't feel I had any problem. I painted a picture in my mind of what a man should be, and that's what I lived by until three years ago."

The picture in his mind allowed him to feel he should never change—and also allowed him to blame the people around him when things went wrong, he said.

Blaming others became a part of his life, he said. At fault were his wives, his family, who hounded him to seek help, and the many others he left when it became obvious they wouldn't let him stay much longer.

At 17, Fleming lied about his age to join the Air Force. He said he knew it would mean more money for his family, himself, a large portion of which he planned to spend on alcohol.

And he did.

After five court-martials, his first marriage (at 19), and a high school diploma, Fleming and his wife settled in Lincoln where he almost completed an 18-month business course.

"I had trouble with the law, drinking and a girl," Fleming recalled, so he made the first of four moves, back and forth from Cleveland to Lincoln.

He said he stayed in each place until problems mounted and then, used a trick the AA defines as "geographical changes," meaning, an alcoholic moves to a different location rather than facing his problems.

His wife moved with him every time, Fleming said, noting "she really cared about me because she stuck with me until I finally drove her away."

While in Cleveland, Fleming said, he had two years of sobriety. He said his marriage was better and he felt better about himself.

"But then I ran into old friends and blew the whole thing. I used the excuse to my wife 'You're not going to run me any more,'" Fleming recalled.

The Flemings moved back to Lincoln in 1956, when their marriage really began to crumble, he continued.

"My wife said she had migraine headaches but I told myself she was just pretending so she would win sympathy from me," Fleming said. "I even forbade her to show any pain."

Then he grimaced, saying he remembered occasionally coming home at mid-day to find her screaming with pain, although there was no one around to hear her.

"I still didn't believe her," he said, "I was really blind."

In 1962 the couple separated—at Fleming's suggestion—and in three years they were divorced, he said. There were no children.

Fleming remarried shortly after the divorce and he said he and his second wife had problems almost immediately. But his second wife refused to put up with his

that is, it hopes to use the fear of facing the legal charges to convince a person to agree to a rehabilitation program of some sort.

Third offense, drunken driving, for instance, is a felony and carries a penalty of not less than one year nor more than five years imprisonment plus suspension of the individual's driver's license for one year after the sentence had been served.

Possibly treatments range from attending four "court classes" about alcoholism and writing three papers, to referral to a treatment center or a psychologist.

"Less than three per cent of the people in the program violate the terms of their probation," Giles said, and he estimated that 60 per cent of the individuals with a drinking problem "recognize their problem and continue participating in recovery programs."

Giles said he occasionally works with the Volunteer Probation Department that's staffed by four professional counselors and about 400 volunteers.

Two University students on probation attended a court class run by Giles as the first step in their probation program.

They complained they were both found by the police with only one can of beer a piece, both will be of age soon, and told of a friend who'd been picked up four times by a policeman and just given a ride home.

Although they acknowledged the need for warnings in other cases, and appreciated the probation thus eliminating a police record for them, the two said they still wished enforcement could be more equitable.

Half-way houses in Lincoln—there are four, all for men—offer an alcoholic a stable home as long as he stays sober, according to the director of one, Ray Condrey.

The house he manages, near 16th and South Streets, gives 11 men, ranging in age from about 20 to 50, a room of their own and one meal a day for \$20 a week.

Lengths of stay vary, Condrey said, and the door is always open when someone wants to go.

The men see their stay at the houses as temporary, generally they go back to their wives and rent their own apartment when they feel they can handle sobriety.

Condrey, also a LAP counselor, critized the Chemical Dependency Unit at Lincoln General Hospital.

He said most of the alcoholics he counsels cannot afford the \$42 daily charge for the unit's program (patients commonly stay in the unit three to six weeks), and welfare agencies prefer to send them to the Hastings treatment center which he said charges \$18 a day.

Heist (the unit's director) complained that the cost is "realistically based on what it costs to run the unit" and said comparable centers cost \$60 a day in Minneapolis and \$80 a day in Chicago.

David Henry, assistant administrator at Lincoln General Hospital, said costs are somewhat higher now than they will be in the future because the initial expense of equipping and staffing the unit.

He said he had contacted state welfare officials before the unit was even built and they agreed to the current price. Since that time, he said, welfare patients have been admitted only to have welfare officials from some counties refuse to pay anything for their treatment.

"We cannot accept an unlimited amount of people who cannot pay," Henry said, and he voiced hopes that a possible \$100,000 federal grant will allow them to lower their prices.

He said he thought it was important to remember that although the cost per day in Hastings is lower, patients commonly stay longer than those in Lincoln and must return for treatment approximately 3.3 times.

"If welfare officials would compare those facts with the 80 per cent cure rate units like ours have, I think they may find they'd save money to send patients here," he said.

However when an alcoholic receives aid, he soon finds sobriety is a life-long, day-to-day ordeal. An AA book recommends the following oath for all alcoholics:

"If we don't take that first drink today, we'll never take it, because it is always today."



drinking, and told him so, which initiated a series of short separations, Fleming said.

"I read the AA 'Big Book'—their gospel—and found a sentence that said 'a heavy drinker can either abstain or moderate,'" Fleming said.

"I showed it to my wife," he continued, "and I was just clinging to that word 'moderation'. I didn't want to stop drinking."

Fleming said he went through three months of sobriety during which he said he was "resentful, irritable and going through withdrawal."

Nine months of "sobriety"—which included 10-day drinking sprees about every three months—and periodic absences from his wife's apartment, ended April 18, 1969, according to Fleming.

"I celebrated my sister's birthday, although she was in Florida and I was here," Fleming recalled. "When I woke up the 11th (in an apartment he had rented since he was not living with his wife), there was a big cigarette burn on the sofa I was on and I just had a cigarette filter in my hand."

"I remember nothing of the night before," Fleming said. He was amazed the apartment didn't go up in flames, and said it convinced him "someone was trying to tell me something."

Fleming has been sober since that night, and he said he still attends two to three AA meetings a week.

A program that seeks to reach the Hank Flemings while they're still young is the Lincoln Municipal Court probation and counseling service for people facing charges for alcohol-related offenses.

Giles, its coordinator, said the service operates on the principle of "tough love,"

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