

Dealing in truth, losing in lies

Coke addict rebuilds his homelife, re-examines his past

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"We went there to be the godparents of a friend's child," Michele says. "but I guess maybe some business went on there that I didn't know about."

The questions kept coming but Michele couldn't stop crying long enough to speak clearly. The police knew more than she did — they'd been following Tony and had bugged their house.

"The main concern for me that day was my kids (Tony and Michele have two children from previous marriages.) They were coming home from school and they weren't going to find (anyone). I had to be at work that day, too. And you know I was not going to work because I was so upset."

She was angry, too. "I was angry with him for lying to me and doing this. But we talked and I find out it's more than that — He didn't do it on purpose to hurt me."

She finally decided to stay with Tony, even though she admits she was still resentful.

"We had been living together for two and a half years and to me, even though this had never been legal, to me it was still a marriage. And to me, that means going through thick and thin," she says.

Shortly after Tony's arrest, the two decided to get married. But on the day of the wedding, Michele was arrested and taken into the police station a second time.

"I think they were trying to put some pressure on him to talk," Michele said.

Without the bride, the guests had to be called and plans cancelled.

They finally were married a few weeks later.

But the honeymoon was shadowed by the impending sentencing, and one more lie. Tony still hadn't admitted to Michele that he was addicted to cocaine. He insisted that he used it only occasionally.

The in-patient treatment program at Lincoln General Hospital's Independence Center helped Tony realize he had a problem — he finally was able to admit that he was addicted. He stopped using drugs and stopped drinking. He stopped seeing many of his old buddies and began attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings.

The family also got involved in treatment, attending lectures and counseling sessions with other families victimized by drug abuse.

Michele remembers hearing the horror stories of debts, beatings and abuse. The plight of others almost made her feel lucky.

And she remembers the lessons of treatment — "Don't blame yourself. Offer to help the abuser, but take care of yourself first. It's their problem."

The family spent time together at a karate class. That also helped them heal, Michele says.

But more than anything else, Michele says faith in God helped get the family through the uncertain times that followed the arrest and then the lonely, financially shaky year that Tony spent in prison.

Tony and Michele remember how tough it was to explain all of it to their two children.

"I could not just disappear," Tony says. "I felt they should know. It was very hard, but we did sit down and talk about it."

"I think they understood that he did something naughty and he was being punished," Michele says. The couple

also tried to warn their kids about the dangers of drugs and alcohol. They know that's why their father had to go away.

After two months at the diagnostic center and six months in minimum security, Tony returned home.

The family still lives in the same house they did three years ago. Tony has the same job — he managed to convince his boss to rehire him, after a lot of negotiating and explaining.

On the surface, the family might seem the same as before drugs entered their lives. But, underneath, things have changed.

Their relationship is deeper now and more honest, Michele says.

"It was an artificial life before. Now it is true communication. Before it was like 'I love you, I miss you.' If we got upset, we got upset. It was never a true communication of feelings, of fears."

Tony no longer feels like he has to live two lives.

"I'm real, I'm not a phony. I have learned to be comfortable with who I am. I have learned to be myself."

Because addicts are never completely "cured," Tony continues to attend AA meetings. Volunteering at the Independence Center, he says, is his way of repaying a debt.

"I'm not preaching to anybody. . . I stick around there because I feel comfortable and needed. It's not the false pride I had selling dope. It's a real thing. I'm useful just for what I am. Not for what I have."

Tony used to hate the police. They

were his enemies. But now he's glad he got caught.

Michele is glad, too. She's glad that the lies stopped before they carried her family into even more trouble.

"This was the only way to stop it. If he hadn't been stopped by the police, he would have gone on and on and it would have gotten worse and worse."

This story was done in conjunction with the UNL College of Journalism depth reporting class, taught by Al Pagel.



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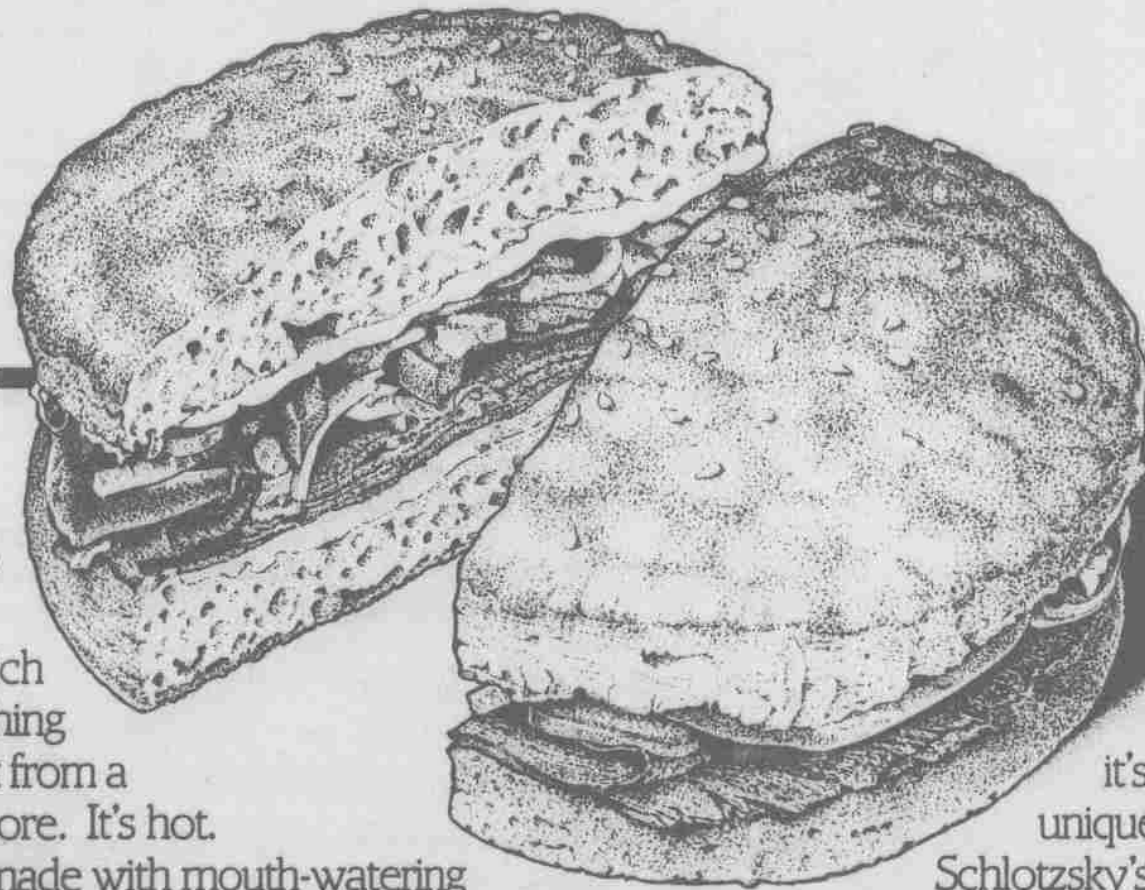
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