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Gambling a 'disease' Problem won't disappear by itself

By Joeth Zucco
Senior Editor

It can start out with the innocent purchase of a pickle card. Then it can progress to a weekly bet of \$20 or \$25 on a favorite football team. Then it can become a bad habit.

Compulsive gambling is a disease much like alcoholism or overeating. It's an addiction like smoking or drugs.

Deb H., a recovering compulsive gambler, started betting in 1979 when she first moved to Lincoln. She said she started gambling because she was bored.

Sports -- football, baseball and basketball -- were her weaknesses. She said that football was a big thing in her family when she was growing up and thus her familiarity with the sport.

"I started out with little bets and won a bit," she said. "Then it was a high just to place them."

Deb said that she was placing bets every day, especially during the United States Football League season, noting that there were only two weeks during the year when there weren't any professional sports in progress.

Deb said there are three phases of gambling: winning, losing and desperation. During her first year of betting, she said that she won a lot of the time. She said that the bets varied from \$100 to \$500, sometimes higher.

"Within a year, I was out of control," she said. "I couldn't sleep. I was starting to lie to cover up the money. I would bet sometimes as high as \$2,500 and had no idea where I was going to get the money if I lost it."

"A compulsive gambler is the best liar, manipulator and con artist. They will say or do anything just to get their hands on money."

Deb said that by the end of 1985 she was in debt \$40,000 and that it was all borrowed money. She said that she borrowed money from anyone who would help her: banks, financial institutions, credit cards, old business acquaintances, friends and family.

"The availability of credit is numerous in this city," she said. "You can apply for credit cards and get cash advances."

She said that she always paid her bookies off, even in instances of being charged 24 percent interest.

"It's a never-ending game," she

said. "I bet through several bookies, not just one. That's how compulsive I was. I figured if I bet through one I could pay back another."

Toward the end of her downward spiral, Deb said, she was near suicide -- a common thought for compulsive gamblers. But, she said, it's not a solution.

"I would often drive out to a lake and visualize what it would be like to drive into a lake and see my husband and children taken care of by my insurance," she said.

She said she placed her last bet on Jan. 12, 1986. She went to her first Gamblers Anonymous meeting the same month.

"I went there on my own," Deb said. "Things were bad at home to the point that I was lying so much my husband had no idea we were on the verge of losing everything we had."

Before she decided to go to a meeting, she called the Gamblers Anonymous Hotline.

"There were two women who were compulsive gamblers and they gave me enough encouragement to go to a meeting. They told me I wasn't alone, that similar stories were heard in the past, so I went to my first meeting."

She said that she decided to go to the meeting because she was working full time with two part-time jobs so she could start paying back the people she had borrowed from.

"I'm nowhere near done," she said. "I've got another four or five years left of payment."

Deb is beginning her fourth year as a member of Gamblers Anonymous. The group meets twice a week and has a support group for family and friends called Gam-Anon. Deb is the chairperson of the Trusted Servants Committee -- she counsels people on an individual basis who don't want to reveal their problems in the group meetings.

At the first meeting, she said, she told her story as a gambler. She then received feedback and ideas and suggestions on how to cope.

"You learn that others can't solve problems for you," she said. "You solve the problem. Others give you alternatives to solving them."

She said that most of the problems a compulsive gambler face involve marital disputes, legal

problems and debt. She said that the financial end is the easiest to solve, while the character patterns are the most difficult.

"I practically destroyed my marriage. My children were resentful. I was lying and cheating and had no money. It surely put a lot of undue stress that didn't need to be there."

Deb said that most compulsive gamblers are hyperactive, have a high energy level, are workaholics, have above average intelligence and are perfectionists. She said that they have to change all of it and learn to become more patient, honest and gain a positive way of thinking.

"One stops gambling through bringing about a progressive character change in oneself," she said. "The key to this recovery is honesty, open-mindedness and willingness to recover."

Deb said that she's learned a lot through attending the Gamblers Anonymous meetings.

"I learned I had to admit I was out of control and my life had become unmanageable," she said. "Gambling was something I wasn't going to be able to do on the social level."

"When you become a member of Gamblers Anonymous you have to analyze everything you've done to people and make amends. It's not an easy thing to do. It takes a long time, but if you work, you'll progressively do it."

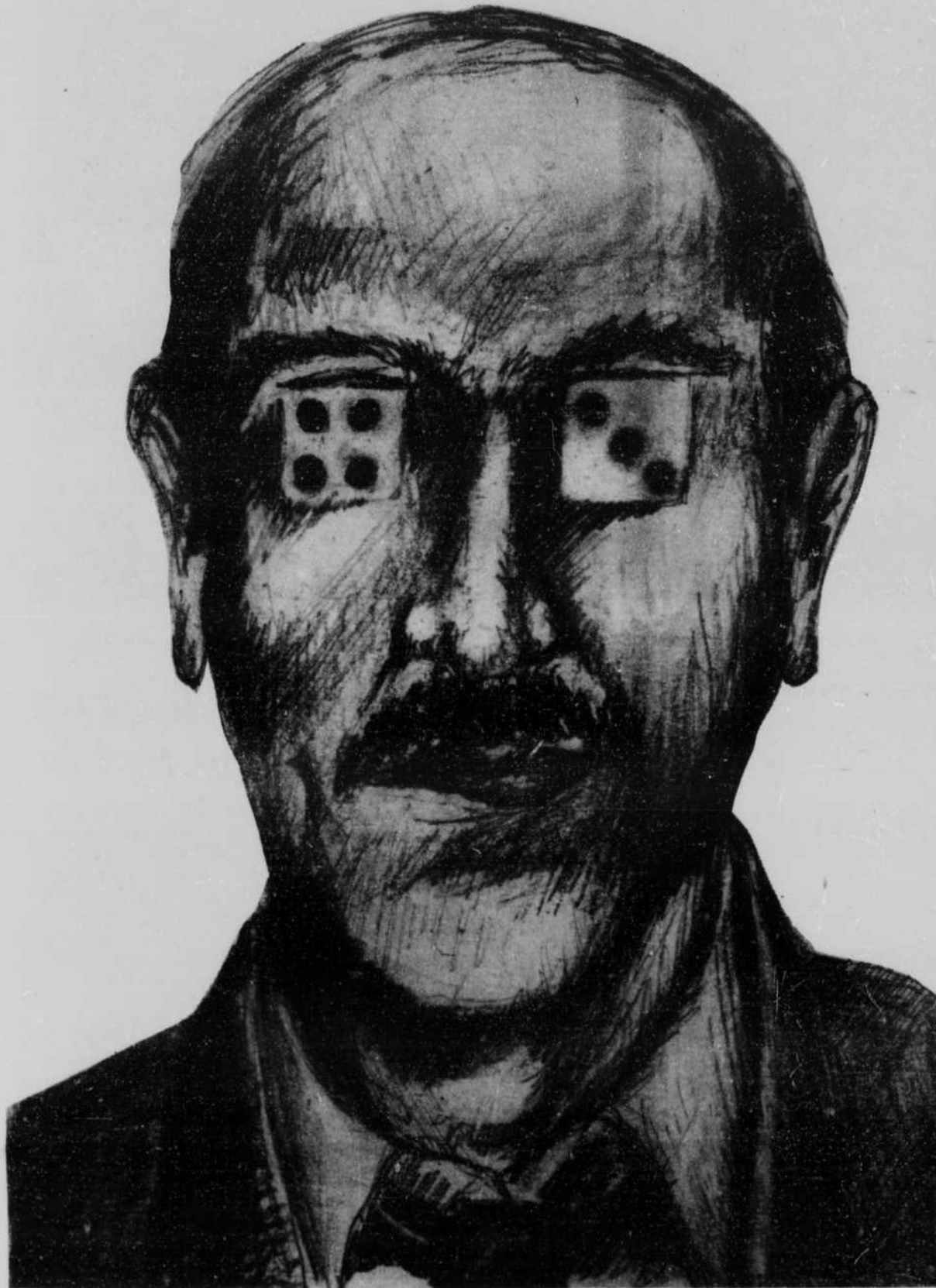
One of the steps to recovery is writing letters of apology to the people who have been hurt. Deb said that she recently sent out some letters.

"It's taken me a long time," she said. "I learned my family was the most important thing in my life. When I was gambling they were second."

"You learn new behavioral problems. You get your self-respect back. You learn how to help somebody else and now you face problems openly. You get all the facts and handle them and that's one day at a time."

Deb said that the first two years of recovery are the hardest. She said that she couldn't watch football games and she had to learn not to read the sports page.

"I didn't attend a couple years of university football games," she said.



Andy Manhart/Daily Nebraskan

Deb said she still is wary even today. She said that she had to take her name off her joint checking account with her husband; she now gets an allowance from him and gets uncomfortable with money because she doesn't want to lose anyone's trust.

"Having the cash flow we have here at the office is scary," Deb, a marketing company partner, said.

"If I would have been in this situation seven or eight years ago, I'd have lost it."

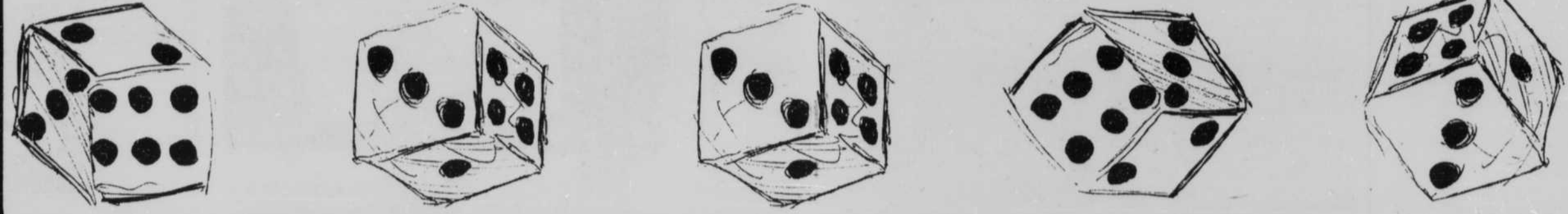
"I'd have gambled it all away." Deb said that gambling, as a disease, is coming out of the closet. She said that it's an addiction that needs some acknowledgement -- like education -- from the state of Nebraska.

"The Pete Rose problem did the

best thing for GA by making it nationwide," she said. "He's, strictly in my opinion, in (the) denial (stage)."

Like alcoholism, gambling is incurable. Anyone who feels they have a problem with gambling should call the Gamblers Anonymous Hotline.

"That's the only way to recover from it."



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