

# Farmington Observer

Volume 92 Number 57

Thursday, April 30, 1981

Farmington, Michigan

74 Pages

Twenty-five cents

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## Alcoholism claims family's life as its victim

The road to sobriety is often a painful and heartrending experience. Alcoholism affects every member of a family. The following story features an area family whose members agreed to talk about their experiences. The family's name has been changed to prevent further suffering.

By M.B. Dillon  
staff writer

Life was never anything but pure hell for the Petersons.

Even if Gayle Peterson wanted to, she couldn't count the times she bailed her alcoholic husband, John, out of jail. There was the time the family car was missing for three days. John, 42, "just plain forgot" where he left it. But after "refreshing his memory" in a bar for six hours, he found it.

There were the nights John stood at the window, unable to stop the flow of tears because he was afraid of the night. Gayle lay in bed, disgusted and baffled. At least those emotions were a switch — anger, hurt and resentment were as much a part of her as her heartbeat.

John's three teen-age children didn't dare bring friends home — they knew their inebriated dad would storm in, abusing them verbally and physically. Karen Peterson, 20, who never had much interest in school, had a fear of the dark, too. Walking through an unit parking lot petrified her.

THE PETERSONS' family life was non-existent. But for John and Gayle, both of whom had an alcoholic parent, that was the status quo. They didn't know any other way to live.

Following a recent counseling session at the Community Commission on Drug Abuse, the Petersons and their therapist agreed to an interview. It was an emotional two hours. Twice John broke down, sobbing as he emptied ugly episodes from his past into the smoke-filled room.

"I remember my dad spending nights in places that had 25-cent beds where you tied your shoes around your neck," said John, who's been dry for 13

months. "Guys would steal them if you didn't."

"He was considered a drunken bum; no one ever said it was a sickness. He was in and out of jail all his life. Alcohol finally killed him."

"I never knew much about alcohol, other than how to spell it and have a pretty good time drinking it," John said. "But somewhere along the line, it changed. It was no good to me anymore."

"I'd get into a zombie state. I'd be animalistic. The kids didn't want anything to do with me, and I resented them, because I didn't think they loved me like they should."

"I had stopped drinking before, but the bottom line finally came when I couldn't care or mentally handle responsibilities."

"ALCOHOL USED to do things for me. Then it started doing things to me. I knew deep down that I had to quit if I wanted a good life."

"I started going to AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) and realized I had three choices — end up like a punch-drunk fighter in a rubber room where adults wear diapers and sit in oversized high chairs; die; or recover."

"Gayle suggested we come here for counseling in addition to going to AA and Al-Anon (a group for alcoholics' families). There've been times I'm bored as hell, but I like getting well. We're learning how to talk to each other."

"I never knew how many things there were to enjoy in life. I guess it's against my nature to be a human being. I'm not used to sobriety — it's a new feeling."

"I've been an emotional cripple. When you're an alcoholic, you freeze your feelings . . . put 'em on hold. I medicated mine."

"I found out it's the first drink that gets you in trouble. If you don't stop drinking, it'll stop you."

"Now I'm learning to verbalize feelings before I reach the point of going into a rage. Before, I never felt anything."

"To me, love was possession and dependence. Love is still new to me. It's

like reaching out and grabbing a hot coal. But now I realize you have to give love away to get it back," said John, tears welling in his eyes.

"The first thing I used to do when Gayle and I got into an argument was get something to ease the pain. I'd be sharp-tongued 'till the day I die, but now I pray a little. I found something outside myself."

It was Gayle's turn to talk.

"Alcohol was our God — the center of our lives," she said. "Everything, even myself, became second to trying to find a way to manage John's drinking. I'd hide bottles, threaten him, cry, be silent. I tried everything to make him feel sorry enough to quit."

"I WAS TAUGHT that if people really loved you, they'd stop drinking. I wondered why I ever fell in love with this terrible person who didn't give a damn about me or anybody. I started feeling like nothing."

"I had no idea how much John hated his drinking or that he cared for his family. But I learned that my behavior — bailing him out of jail and covering up for him — was enabling him to drink. It's a family illness, and we were just as sick and affected as he was. We also have to recover."

Karen said things are "a lot better now."

"I'm meeting a lot more friends, and I can have them come over 'cause Dad's not making an ass out of himself. And we eat a little more regularly, too. The other night none of us could sleep, so we stayed up listening to spooky records. I used to hate the dark."

"WE WENT to our first party the other day," Gayle said. "We went to see 'Ammie' at the Fisher with some sober friends. It was so nice not worrying about how I was going to get home. And we had our first real surprise birthday party for our son, Paul. When John was drinking, we didn't have time for that kind of thing. You should have seen my son . . . a million dollars couldn't replace the look on his face."

"Holidays are the hardest," said John, "but we spent Easter with three quality, sober alcoholics and it was one



Photo illustration by BILL BRESLER/staff photographer

Alcoholism, not a solitary prison, touches the lives of every family member.

of the best holidays I can remember since I was a kid. We laughed and laughed and I even felt flashes of serenity and inner calmness."

The therapist was smiling.

"John's as sensitive an alcoholic as I've allowed myself to meet," she said. "And I've seen more growth in this family than they give themselves credit for. They're learning to communicate, love, and strive for growth."

"Yeah," said John, "and growth is painful as hell sometimes."

## Patrol stalks drunk drivers

By Mary Rodrigue  
staff writer

There are 950 fewer drunk drivers on the roads of Oakland County this year because of a roving alcohol enforcement team.

The Traffic Improvement Association of Oakland County (TIA) and the county Sheriff's Department are jointly administering a \$1.2 million four-year federal grant aimed at getting drunks off the highways.

For just over a year, an eight-car enforcement team has been stalking drunk motorists in a well publicized campaign. About 25 billboards along with radio, television and newspaper ads are blaring the theme: Drunk Drivers

ers in Oakland County, the Party's Over.

"Our first year has been very successful," said Jim Curtis, sheriff's department coordinator.

"The blood alcohol level of those arrested is still quite high. .17 is average (.10 is considered legally drunk) so they're not light drinkers. But we've taken 950 drunks off the roads and that's got to have some affect."

Six sheriff patrol cars, one state police cruiser and one car from whatever local jurisdiction is being worked roam the county from 11 p.m. Wednesday until 4 a.m. Sunday. They travel a half dozen of the worst accident corridors in

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## Hands across the water

### Penpals bridge international gap

By Mary Rodrigue  
staff writer

Fifty voices sang "O, Canada" followed by "The Star Spangled Banner" Tuesday morning and there wasn't even a hockey game in sight.

The singers, from Walker School in Windsor, Ontario and Flanders School

in Farmington, were celebrating their first meeting.

The young Canadians and Americans, ranging from second grade to fourth, have been penpals since last October.

Tuesday the 26 Canadian students and their teachers spent the day at Flanders getting acquainted with the

people behind the letters and pictures they've been exchanging.

"This is the first time they've met but they seem to homogenize," said Sandra Moore, teacher from Windsor.

It was hard to separate the visitors from the hosts as all of the children participated in the first activity of the day, a music class spiced with dancing and singing.

"They're not really strangers because they've been writing letters for quite some time now," said Shirley Northrop, Flanders teacher. "Many of the children have never been to the U.S. before."

The international class went from music to the media center and later to gym, lunch and an afternoon of presentations by staff.

Dubbed "Hands Across the Water,"

the idea was conceived by Mrs. Northrop. Vacationing on Lake Temagami in northern Ontario last summer, she contacted Windsor school personnel asking for a seasoned teacher willing to undertake a project with American penpals.

WINDSOR PERSONNEL contacted Mrs. Moore, who immediately sent Mrs. Northrop's class a boxful of letters. Since then, the youngsters have exchanged pictures, Christmas cards, and more letters. One set of penpals talked by phone prior to their meeting.

Tuesday was also the first meeting between Mrs. Moore and Mrs. Northrop, who have become penpals.

The two classes plan to continue writing letters. And Mrs. Northrop's class will visit Walker School in May.



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

hands for a dance in Judith Moslak's music class. At right, penpals Allison Fultz of Farmington and Sonya Boyce of Windsor play a tune.

## Drunk Drivers The Party's Over in Oakland County.

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