

A former alcoholic

Now he helps others stop drinking

By Teri Banas
staff writer

"All you ever hear about are the losers. But in my line of work, I can really get enthused when I see a winner. It gives you hope."

—Harland Sercumbe
Jackson Prison
administrator

Leroy never realized he had a drinking problem — or even thought about it much — until one day before a prison screening committee when a judge leaned over and asked him that very question.

The inquiry wasn't enough to make him stop. In fact, what followed was years of mistakes, miracles, and a lot of growing up with the help of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Now 43, Leroy (his full name is withheld because of AA rules for anonymity) has taken an about-face from a life of self-destruction and unchanneled energies.

Today, the man is in demand. He counsels other alcoholics at two state correctional facilities in Michigan; he works as a probation officer at the 35th District Court in Plymouth; he has a satisfying marriage with a woman he calls "my best friend," and supports his family as a hi-lo driver for a Detroit slaughterhouse.

"EVERYTHING THAT'S happened to me in my life was necessary to bring me to what I am. Otherwise, I wouldn't be sober today," he says.

"I'm what I consider a hard-liner. If you go out and drink then not enough has happened to you to have a desire not to drink."

Leroy has been sober for about seven years.

In a recent interview, he projected an image of an articulate person whose telling of yesterday's anecdotes were often interjected with today's insight.

He talked of his past life, when his drinking became an automatic response to any problem, and about his work with imprisoned alcoholics.

On Wednesday nights, Leroy takes to the highway enroute to Jackson.

He spent more than two years at Jackson on an armed robbery charge, and attended his first AA meeting with in those gray walls.

Today, he coordinates weekly meetings there, lines up weekly speakers and provides the inmates with AA reading material.

HARLAND SERCUMBE, assistant director of special activities at Jackson, estimates as much as half the prison population there has "some kind of drinking problem."

For many of the inmates, addictions swing from drugs to alcohol "and back the other way," says Sercumbe.

Although alcohol is prohibited inside the walls, it's readily found brewing on the sly by inmates who manage to confiscate the ingredients for "spud juice" from prison kitchens. The basic necessities for this potent juice are potatoes, yeast and sugar.

"We pour out hundreds of gallons of this stuff every day," says Sercumbe. Once found out, punishment for those found drinking can range from a mark on their prison sentence to "a few days in the hole."

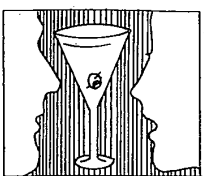
"What else can you do — take away their library cards?" says Sercumbe. In the total prison population of about 3,000 inmates, about 125 regularly attend AA meetings and study sessions during the week. The alcoholics' recovery program is one of the prison's oldest programs, started in the mid-30s by two ex-inmates.

Some of the inmates are required to attend the program; fewer go on their own. Some attend to appease the parole board.

"We don't care how they get there, but we do care what happens to them once they get into it," Sercumbe said.

THE PRISON official says the program couldn't reach the men as it does without the help of the many outside guests who travel from around the state to tell their stories to the inmates.

"A guy like Roy can relate to these



guys. They know he's walked that walk. And you can't talk that talk unless you've walked that walk.

"It makes the guys feel they're not alone. It gives them hope," says Sercumbe.

Leroy, meanwhile, has been attending the Jackson meetings weekly for the past 10 months. Before that, he traveled there on an irregular basis for three years.

Leroy believes the pressures of confinement — overcrowding, sex offenses — can escalate one's desire to drink in itself.

"You hear the same complaints every year — it's a bad situation, the food's lousy, it's overcrowded. While their situation is different from street people's, the results can be the same."

"Up there, however, if you get wiped out on juice, nine times out of 10 you'll get busted. You stand out and end up on the detention block."

But even with these special pressures, he finds life can be improved by using some of "AA's tools."

There's such a thing as being free in a confined setting."

LEROY'S ESTIMATES of alcohol's impact on these inmates is considerably higher than Sercumbe's.

"I really believe that if you took a poll in prison you'd probably find in 80-85 percent of the cases that alcohol was related to that crime. From my time there — booze came up as one of the ingredients."

For Leroy, drinking became a problem at a very young age. At 18, he and a friend got "really drunk" and ended

up in the Detroit House of Correction on a larceny conviction. They were caught by police while attempting to steal some auto fenders.

"An alcoholic lives in insanity," Leroy says looking back at a cloud. "The way I saw things happening wasn't the way it was."

He was a youth who once dreamed of being a Detroit police officer — but found he couldn't meet the height requirements — and his resentment against the authorities propelled him into taking reckless actions.

Following his first run-in with the law, he jumped around from job to job as a butcher. "By trade, butchers are heavy drinkers. I ran the gambit of jobs."

In the early '60s he would serve another 2½ years at Ionia Reformatory for an armed robbery charge. Then in 1969 he was sent to Jackson for another two years on a similar charge.

"When I was released from Ionia I thought I had it all together, but I didn't."

While at Jackson, he started attending AA meetings. In the beginning, he said he would sneak out of the meetings and see a movie in another part of the prison.

But after a while, he started listening to AA's message. "I knew some change had to be made. And after all, your brain's like a sponge. After a while you start absorbing what you hear, whether you like it or not."

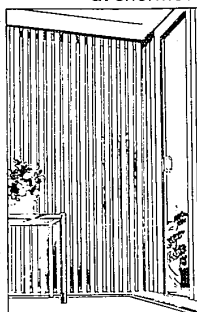
After this release, however, it was back to the same old tricks. "I was single again, off parole, and started hanging out at the Playmate Lounge, drinking."

In the mid-'70s, he faced another larceny conviction. But this time, his luck changed — in a situation he would later describe as no less than a miracle.

Through the intercession of a sympathetic suburban police officer, he did not return to Jackson. Instead, he spent 14 days at the Detroit House of Correction.

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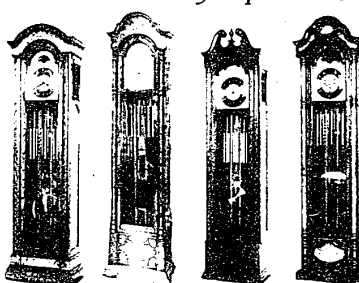
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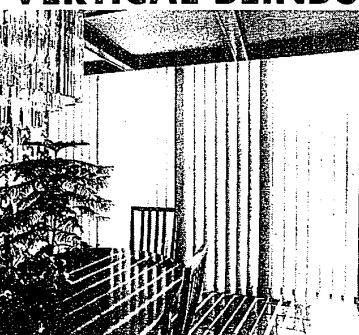
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