

Suburban Life

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JERRY ZOLYNSKI

Television personality Dennis Wholey celebrated four years as a recovering alcoholic on Christmas eve.

Best gift of all was to himself

By Ellen E. Magon
special writer

JOY IS A good word to focus on when describing my life today," says public television personality Dennis Wholey, who celebrated four years as a non-drinking alcoholic on Christmas Eve.

"That's the best Christmas present I ever gave myself," said the host of PBS' LateNight America.

But Wholey is not celebrating his milestone quietly and privately. Instead, he has just completed a nationwide tour promoting his new book about alcoholism, "The Courage to Change" (Houghton Mifflin Co., \$15.95). Wholey decided to go public with his alcoholism, he says, because there are so few books that discuss the disease in non-medical, non-technical terms; and there are virtually no books that describe the personal impact of the problem on an estimated 20 million alcoholics in America today. The problem, says Wholey, affects one-third the population.

IN HIS BOOK, Wholey, who lives in Southfield, interviews celebrities such as Sid Caesar, Doc Severinsen, Grace Slick and Don Newcombe, all alcoholics. He also interviewed the families of alcoholics.

Wholey defines an alcoholic as someone with a "genetic predisposition to drink — an accident waiting to happen. The alcoholic cannot predict how much he or she will drink, how long he or she will spend drinking or cannot predict their behavior afterward," says Wholey.

Wholey says that when he was drinking, he would only drink from Friday afternoon until Sunday night and would remain sober and work during the week. In looking back at his life as a

drinking alcoholic, he recalls the period as "a time when I should have been happy. I had a career, and surface things were going well.

"BUT THOSE LAST couple of years, it was an emotional bottoming out," Wholey says. "I was bruised and battered. I had no self-esteem, no self-worth and I was afraid I was never going to be happy.

"I had been in therapy 20 years with the best psychologists and psychiatrists. I thought, you change, you get better, you get happy.

"But things weren't getting better. I had a feeling my life wasn't working. I was banging my head against the wall."

Wholey went to the then-manager of Channel 56, Jack Caldwell, in mid-December 1980 and told Caldwell he was quitting television.

"I JUST WANTED to quit," Wholey says flatly. It's the only explanation he gives for his action.

Caldwell asked Wholey if alcohol was the problem.

"I told him 'no.' And I didn't think it was," Wholey said. "I don't know why he asked me that. It's just fortunate for me that I called Father Vaughn Quinn, the director of Sacred Heart's Alcohol Rehabilitation Program. I had interviewed him for my show and he put it all together.

"He listened to my story for three hours: the story about my sense of isolation and depression and thoughts of suicide. He said to me, 'The problem in your life is alcohol.' It was a big surprise to me.

By Sherry Kahan
special writer

LONG BEFORE the Betty Ford Clinic in California, there was Brighton Hospital.

Set up in 1953 with three patients in a farmhouse west of Brighton, it was the only facility in Michigan at that time to treat alcoholism. In fact, it was one of only three institutions of this kind in the nation.

Some of its methods have been adopted by facilities that came later. For example, its family education program, pioneered by Stephanie Abbott of Franklin's, was the first in Michigan.

The hospital has expanded its original mission somewhat because of a growing number of dual diagnoses, both alcoholism and drugs. The past few years have seen a great increase in the use of more than one drug by the same person.

While the hospital is in Livingston County, the majority of its patients come from Wayne and Oakland counties. Its occupancy rate is 99 percent.

BRIGHTON HOSPITAL was founded by Harry Henderson, a member of the Michigan Liquor Control Commission. He raised money for his project by placing canisters in bars all over the state. They carried the message, "Skip a drink for a drunk." Bartenders encouraged their customers to drop in their coins.

Now, that hospital has added a 19,000-square-foot wing. It has a kitchen, dining room, meeting, social and exercise rooms for patients and an expanded laboratory. Its new library is named in honor of former Wayne County Circuit Judge Benjamin Burdick of Birmingham, a loyal supporter of the hospital. He is a founding trustee and served many years as a hospital officer.

ALTHOUGH NO beds were added, the addition includes 32 patient beds moved from the facility's older section, which is scheduled for renovation.

Architect of the wing was Louis G. Redstone Associates of Livonia. It was built by A.Z. Shilina and Sons, also of Livonia.

The rooms are pleasant, some offering a view of the small lake on the 69-acre property. It is easy to overlook the seriousness of their purpose.

Within these rooms, sobriety starts — or it doesn't. This is where patients get in touch with their families, themselves and others — or they don't.

This is where they respond to motivation and fellowship and yank back their self-esteem — or they don't.

AND THIS is where shaky, guttural and angry men and women can be turned around in a week or two, and started on the way to helping others.

Half the patients make it the first time, said Ellen Ayres of Beverly Hills, associate director of in-patient counseling. About 89 percent make it the second time.

"It seems like people have to make one more try," she said. The denial that they are alcoholics is so strong."

BUT BEFORE a patient enters rehabilitation, he or she must first be detoxified.

"Some of them come in deathly ill," said Dr. Russell Smith, medical director. "Those who come in as volunteers are in pretty bad shape."

"They waited too long and are in a medical crisis. We administer emergency drugs to restore the heart rate and bring down the blood pressure. It is similar to a diabetic crisis."

Sometimes, the patients must return home "half fairly sick" because their stay is limited by their insurance. "But by then at least all the alcohol is out of their system."

(By state law all medical insurance policies must include minimal coverage for treatment of substance abuse.)

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— Dr. Russell Smith
Brighton Hospital
medical director

SOMETIMES, TOXIC brain will last many weeks," he said. "Post withdrawal depression can last for months."

The patient might also have alcohol hepatitis, alcohol liver disease and alcohol heart disease. Diet is important all through this. The person who drinks a lot can't make use of the food he eats. So we try to alter his diet and lifestyle."

Ayers is one of those involved in the alteration. In this effort, the family becomes involved. Many of them need help, too.

"During rehabilitation, each member of the family has one individual interview," Ayers said. "The family gets very sick of the alcoholic and of living around a person who is very disturbing."

"At first, family members are angry because they feel so much pain. Alcoholism brings more pain than you can believe."

"A FAMILY may express it in anger, but underneath is pain. They have to get it out by talking, by sharing it. That changes things immediately."

She urged women alcoholics to find aid early. Too many of them hold back until they are totally helpless. Ayers, herself, is a recovering alcoholic.

"Don't wait until you're almost dead before you come in. It is more acceptable for men to get treatment. But it's still the dark ages for women."

"They have to be a model wife and mother. They feel far more guilt than the men."

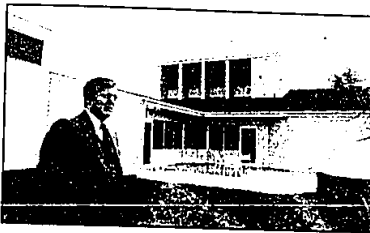
Ayers' day is made when one of her patients, male or female, smiles.

"IF YOU can get them to laugh a little, it means they are starting to heal. A little later, some begin to hear birds outside the hospital, and take walks around the lake." Nature helps people recover, Ayers believes.

"It helps them to get out of themselves and learn to have fun while not drinking."

Also playing a role are group therapy, individual counseling, peer counseling, educational lectures and the fellowship of dining, playing cards and exercising together.

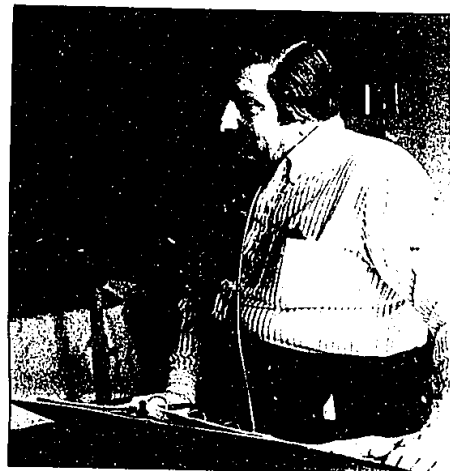
Ayers' day is made when, after the tough first two weeks of rehabilitation, newcomers suddenly become old timers, and counsel the new arrivals



Brighton's executive director Ivan Harner stands in front of the new wing of the hospital, designed and built by Livonia firms.

Brighton-ing the way

Expansion boosts program for alcoholics



Dr. Russell Smith

ART EMANUELE/staff photographer

on an infomal basis.

"It's a beautiful to see."

CHILDREN REACT strongly to an alcoholic adult, said Brian Dugay, associate director of outpatient counseling services. "Children of an alcoholic act in a number of ways."

"A hero child will sometimes assume responsibilities that the alcoholic used to take care of, like mowing lawns, washing the car and looking after the kids. They never really have a childhood. Their self-esteem becomes wrapped up in taking care of others. So they neglect themselves."

Another child might act in unusual ways because he finds that if his behavior is normal, nobody notices him, Dugay said. The child may do negative things to get attention, such as breaking windows, smoking pot, getting poor grades and acting defiant.

The child of an alcoholic might say, "I don't belong."

"THEY FEEL the alcoholism was their fault. During the drinking, they have a great deal of fear. But they have tremendous loyalty to the family."

They believe that if they talked to a school counselor about this, they would be letting the family down."

During the third week of rehabilitation, the patients are urged to involve themselves in Alcoholics Anonymous, and their families in Alanon. Outpatient care continues as needed.

All these steps are taken to give the recovering alcoholic support to maintain sobriety.

Out-patient care also is available at the hospital to those who don't need the in-patient program. Introduction to Recovery is a new service designed to help those whose drinking has begun to interfere with their day-to-day functioning.

IT IS a 12-week outpatient group therapy program that helps chemically dependent people learn about the disease, its effects and its treatment. For information on this service, call the hospital outpatient department at 227-5145.

A free community education program focusing on aiding family members to understand alcohol and chemical dependency is held at the hospital at 8 p.m. the first Tuesday of each month. Call 227-1211, Ext. 276 for further details.



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Brian Dugay and Ellen Ayres are part of the Brighton treatment team.