

Voices of recovery: Brian Lemley

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VOR Brian Lemley

Residence: Elkton

Brian Lemley said that his issues with substance abuse can be traced back to when he was a kid.

“Growing up, one of our neighbors grew pot, so the neighbor kids would swipe some of it and get high,” he said.

Even at 11 years old, Lemley said he found getting high to be an escape from the teasing and bullying other kids put him through for having a physical deformity with his eye.

“When I started gravitating toward this group of guys, it was a clique where we were all buddies,” he said. “By 15, I was a drug dealer running weed around to all these people. I wanted the money, but, more importantly, I got to belong to this social group. I found acceptance.”

Looking back now, Lemley said that he recognizes drugs gave him a self-identity when he was struggling to find self-confidence.

By the time he was 18, however, his boundaries on drug use began to crumble, ultimately leading him to try things like cocaine and intravenous methamphetamine.

“I spent a lot of years up for days on meth and spent a stretch of time in jail for DUIs,” he said. “Then cocaine became so prevalent in the county and I liked that high so much better.”

In his early 20s, Lemley also got married and had two children, which unfortunately would lead to some of his darkest episodes.

His drug use had a rough effect on the family despite the fact that he continued to financially support them, Lemley said.

“My children didn’t call me dad, they called me ‘Big Mark,’” he said. “There was an open door policy, but they didn’t see me as a father.”

Lemley said his cocaine use would often push him “right to the edge,” estimating that he nearly died four or five times during overdoses.

Attempts at recovery became almost too numerous to count, Lemley said, noting that he’s been to at least 20 facilities from Florida to Buffalo, N.Y. Sobriety was difficult. He could get clean and would enjoy being clean, but upon leaving a facility would relapse, he said.

“There’s a lot of shame, embarrassment and failure inside of 30 years of using,” he said. “There were times that I thought I would never get clean.”

On Super Bowl Sunday 2011, Lemley nearly died from an overdose and decided that enough was enough. He called his sponsor, his priest and the Haven House, a rehabilitation center in Elkton, looking for advice.

“They told me that I’ve been through enough rehabs to know the process and that it was time for me to get serious about it,” he said. “I’ve walked it out one day at a time since then.”

Lemley said that he has come to realize that his drug use didn’t stem from uncontrollable urges, but instead from his poor self-image.

“You can get over the addiction pretty easily, but what isn’t easy is changing the way you feel about yourself,” he said.

Lemley credits the guidance of a 12-step program for helping him in his recovery, noting that he still attends a few meetings a week.

“I don’t attend as many as I once did because I find that people use meetings to hide from life sometimes,” he said. “I got clean so I could have a life.”

Lemley said that he has been able to reconcile with his children and make relationships with his grandchildren.

“There’s an intimacy now. I get to hold my grandchildren, which are memories I don’t have of my own children,” he said. “When I wake up now, I just want to hold that child.”

Lemley said that he also has spent time reconciling with himself, though he knows it will be a longer process after spending three decades actively using. He now lives in an Oxford, Pa., house with 10 other men and an outreach worker in Delaware. He is self-employed as a construction worker.

“I’ve found that in recovery you become more important to yourself,” Lemley said. “Not in a bad kind of way, but that I want to be a part of my children’s lives and I have stuff to do, people to help.”

This story is part of a weekly series put together in partnership with the Cecil County Health Department focusing on recovery from addiction.

For more information on available treatment services, contact the Cecil County Health Department's Alcohol & Drug Recovery Center at 410-996-5106, visit www.cecilcountyhealth.org or stop in to 401 Bow St., Elkton, MD 21921.

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