

## Teenage Drinkers: Our Future Alcoholics?

# JEAN'S STORY

## A Mixture of Arrests, Hospitals And Finally AA Membership

First in a 3-part series  
By SHARON DARNIEDER

At 16, Jean (not her real name), refused to admit she was a teenage alcoholic and told herself she just "liked to drink too much." But she knew something was wrong with her life and one day decided it wasn't worth living anymore.

"I was really in despair," she recalled, "and I saw no possible hope of things ever changing. I grabbed a razor and tried to cut my wrists" (she still has the scars).

She didn't die then, nor all the other times she could have.

By the time she tried to commit suicide she had been drinking steadily for two years, sometimes daily more than a quart of gin, her favorite drink.

She often drank straight from the bottle and says, "I can't remember a time in my life when I didn't take a drink and want more. In the beginning I could control it," she added, "but soon I couldn't stop."

Somehow she survived her teen years, a mixture of booze, arrests and hospitals, and now, at 23, has been sober 2 1/2 years through her own desire and the help of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA).

But before she could bring herself to face the fact that she needed help to stop, she was another statistic in the ever growing number of teenage alcoholics — possibly the most overlooked age group that has the illness today.

Those who treat and deal with alcoholics agree that excessive teen drinking is a problem which sometimes leads to alcoholism. But because it's a progressive disease, it takes time to become an alcoholic. It doesn't always strike in the teen years as it did for Jean.

There is no complete survey of the number of alcoholic teens available for this area, but according to Dr. Ruth P. Oakley, director of the John L. Norris Clinic for Alcoholism, at the Rochester State Hospital, the youngest male treated there was 16 and the youngest female, 18.

### 'I Can't Remember When I Didn't Like Booze'

"As statistics we can only use those we see," said William W. Dugan, director of the Alcoholism Information and Counseling Center, "and many teens never seek help."

Dr. Oakley agrees with Dugan that figures on teenage alcoholics, as well as those for other alcoholic age groups, are misleading.

"The estimates of about 9 million alcoholics in the country, with about 30,000 in Monroe County are probably far too low," she adds.

Often, the adult alcoholic can trace his problems with drink back to his teens, but for Jean it began earlier.

"When I was a child I can't remember a time in my life when I didn't like booze," she said. "It held a kind of magic for me. I loved it."

And as she grew older she made a mistake many teens make today. At 13 she decided that what she'd seen happen to friends who took drugs wasn't for her.

"I played it safe. I stuck with alcohol," she says sadly. "I didn't know the same things can happen to you with alcohol because it's also a drug."

Although alcohol can be addictive, it doesn't become that for all alcoholics, according to Dr. Oakley.

"True addiction is a physical and psychological dependence," she said. "Not all alcoholics drink constantly, some are periodic drinkers."

"The severity of the disease can be just as bad in a periodic drinker as in a daily one," she added.

Not all heavy or social drinkers are alcoholics either, she noted.

"The whole thing that diagnoses an alcoholic is the loss of control once he takes that first drink," says Dr. Oakley. "He does not have a choice after that."

Or, as Jean puts it, "It's not the quantity or what you drink, but how it affects you after you drink. You don't have to be 60 to be an alcoholic."

### 'I Spent My 20th Birthday in Jail'

Although she was born in the United States, Jean lived with her family for a time in England because of her father's job. She began drinking and dropped out of school there at 16 not because of alcohol but because she just "didn't like it."

A year later she was hospitalized because of her drinking for the first time under what doctors termed a "behavior disorder." Although her attempted suicide took place in England, about one in three suicides in this country, according to the Alcoholism Information and Counseling Center.

She spent time in a halfway house, apartments, at home and in hospitals, but no matter where she went she managed to continue drinking.

One hospital put her on antabuse (a drug taken by alcoholics that will make them sick if they drink while it's in their system) but she still drank.

After a trip to the States to visit friends she went back to England, got in trouble, and was asked to leave.

"I chose Syracuse to come to," she says, "because I didn't know anyone there. I was trying the geographic cure and I kept thinking if I could get away and make a whole new start things would get better. It didn't work."

She landed with \$30 to her name, checked into a YWCA, and got a job through an agency as a file clerk.

Although she wasn't drinking at first, she soon started again and as a result of a drunken weekend lost her job. After smashing a friend's car she borrowed without permission, she got arrested.

"I spent my 20th birthday in jail," she said, "and I remember sitting there and thinking how the hell can all this be happening to me?"

Relatives made the trip to Syracuse to get her out of jail and the judge released her on the condition that she live with them.

"They were social drinkers and I tried to be one too," she said. "It didn't work and I kept wanting more. I didn't realize an alcoholic can never be cured, just stopped. I will never be able to take just a social drink."

Soon she was drinking more and more and was asked to leave. After existing as best she could, often on welfare, she began to steal liquor and food and was picked up once for shoplifting.

"I was a daily drinker," she notes, "but I went on binges too. I never had convulsions or the DTs (delirium tremens) although I did see things once or twice."



Graphics by Susan McKinney

Eventually, she wound up at Meyer Memorial Hospital, Buffalo, and from there was transferred to the John L. Norris Clinic at Rochester State Hospital.

Although she says her stay there "really helped because I identified with the people there and found out a lot of things I knew intellectually but hadn't been able to apply to my life," she still continued to drink after she was released.

"I couldn't give it up," she says, thinking back. "I couldn't admit I couldn't handle it. I had always been encouraged to be independent. I could not admit there was something I couldn't control."

What finally made her take the AA method seriously, taking a day at a time without a drink, had never even occurred to her.

"I got very ill," she said, "and went to a doctor who told me I was anemic and my liver was going and if I continued to drink the way I was I'd be dead in 10 or 15 years. He also told me I was pregnant."

Once she found out she had new life in her she "never had a stronger reason in my life to stop drinking and I went three weeks without one."

But she slipped again when a friend she knew called and invited her to dinner.

"I didn't want to drink while I was pregnant, but I couldn't imagine a nice dinner without wine so I just had one glass. But I couldn't stop and I had another and another until the friend I was with made me stop."

The next day she was sick again and that's when she said to herself "none for today."

The incident made her realize that no matter "how strong my incentive to quit drinking was, once I had my first drink that was it. I didn't control the drink, the drink controlled me."

Today Jean is trying to become a productive member of society and make a good home for her daughter in a small, modest apartment not far from downtown. She has an older model car and is excited about the prospect of a new job. She still attends AA meetings "three or four times a week."

"I need to remember," she says. "When you stop remembering what it was like you become complacent and when you forget you begin to think you can handle a drink. You can't," she says shaking her head.

Although Jean's parents separated when she was 11 and got divorced four years later, she doesn't feel this contributed to her alcoholism.

"Others have a rough life and make it," she said. "I sincerely believe alcoholism is an illness. It happens regardless of your circumstances and it doesn't matter about your background. I had a lot of opportunities but couldn't use them. I'm about the only one in my family without a college education."

"I think I would have become an alcoholic no matter when I started drinking, unless I never drank," she added.

### 'I Couldn't Admit I Couldn't Handle It'

She admits she's had a life like most people never imagine but says, "although it's been hell I'm glad I've had it now. I have a lot of years ahead of me to catch up."

As a former teenage alcoholic, Jean is keenly aware of the liberal attitudes many young people have toward alcohol.

"I think it's important for people of any age, especially the young, to be aware of the dangers of alcohol, that it's just not a social beverage," she says earnestly. "It can ruin your mental and physical health."

Next Week: A look at the National Council on Alcoholism's program presented to a religion class at Bishop Kearney High School.