

Ex-con looking forward to drug-free Christmas

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

Jeff W. doesn't remember much of Christmas last year.

He spent the holiday alone in a house in Iowa. Alone — that is — except for a supply of cocaine, marijuana and alcohol.

"I sat there and forced myself into oblivion," he recalled. "I felt like nobody cared about me. I didn't have much of a life."

Last year, fugitive from the law, addicted to drugs and alcohol, and estranged from his family in the Rochester area, Jeff seemed to have no future.

"I was killing myself slowly, but I was killing myself," he acknowledged.

This year however, Jeff will celebrate Christmas with his family. He now lives in a half-way house in Rochester and attends treatment programs. He is also serving five years on probation for burglary charges after spending three months in Monroe County Jail last spring.

He could just as easily have spent this Christmas in prison. But, he added, he had already spent many Christmases "in my own jail."

Jeff began building that jail when he was just 12 years old. That was when he began experimenting with alcohol and such drugs as marijuana, LSD and prescription medications.

By age 14, Jeff had become such a heavy user that he was placed in a treatment program. When he left the program, however, he stayed sober for only two months.

During the summer of 1984, when he was 15, Jeff began getting in trouble for vandalism and assault. In October of that year, he began an eight-month stay in another treatment program.

Jeff spent Christmas, 1984, at the treatment center, away from his family. "It was the first Christmas away from home," he said. "I was very depressed, upset, angry. I missed my parents an awful lot."

Released from the program in June, 1985, he managed to remain sober only until late September.

After he began using again, he started stealing drugs from other addicts. At the same time, he was involved in a relationship with a girl who didn't like drugs, so he had to keep his use hidden, even as he was sinking progressively deeper into addiction.

"That Christmas (1985), I didn't even wind up opening presents," Jeff said, "because I passed out before I opened my presents."

In the spring of 1986, Jeff quit school. He worked part-time jobs and began stealing for drug money.

Jeff was still living at home, but his par-

ents increasingly avoided confronting him about what he was doing. "They just got to the point where they felt like they couldn't do anything for me," he recalled.

The relationship with the girl broke up that summer. "I started getting back into harder drugs," Jeff said. "Cocaine, acid, almost everything."

He returned to school in the fall of 1986 and began dealing drugs at the school to support his habit. He was also continuing to steal. One large burglary in the spring of 1987 netted him enough money to stay high for several consecutive weeks.

In the fall of that year, however, he was arrested for the burglary. Two weeks later he was caught dealing at school. So he sold many of his possessions and, armed with \$300 and a supply of drugs and alcohol, boarded a bus for Colorado.

"I was on the bus (for three days), but I can't tell you much about it," Jeff said. "I remember dealing on the bus, passing out a lot. I wanted to avoid being afraid, being scared."

He lived with an aunt in Colorado for a while, but was kicked out because of his behavior. He then found a roommate who also used drugs, and the two moved to Vail, Colo.

Meanwhile, Jeff went through a series of jobs, losing them because of his drug use. By the summer of 1988, his weight had dropped from 170 to 130 pounds.

When his roommate suddenly left without paying the rent, Jeff was evicted from their apartment. Over the next few months, he was forced to stay with friends, in rooming houses, and even in cars.

By this time, he remembered, his parents would have nothing to do with him. They hung up when he called, and his letters were returned unopened.

The roommate eventually returned, and the two moved on to Iowa. Unable to find work at first, he lived in his friend's care for six weeks. After a short stay in a flop house, Jeff found a family that took him in in the fall of 1988.

That Christmas, the family left him alone, and he went on a binge.

After losing his job, Jeff was kicked out of the home a short time later. He lived in his friend's car again, then moved into the basement of another friend's home.

In early February, Jeff found a good job, and was beginning to think that his life would straighten out. But at a party shortly after getting the job, he became loud and offensive, and was thrown out into the cold without his coat.

"I got angry and upset, and I started hollering at God," Jeff said. "Where is my life going? I've got a good job. I'm not stealing from anybody. Show me what I need to do."

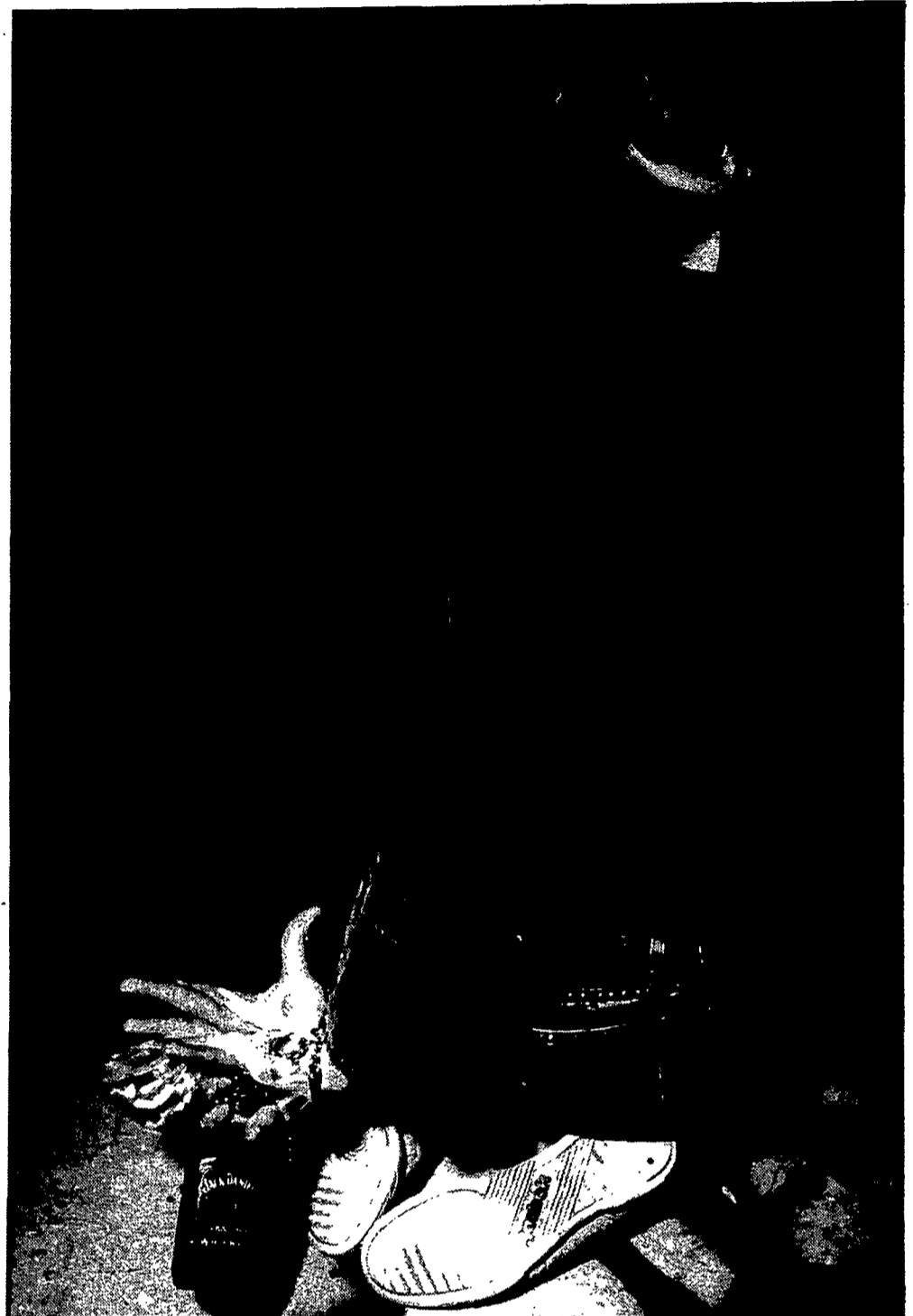


Photo-illustration by Babette G. Augustin

Hollering at God was out of character for Jeff. He acknowledged that he'd always believed in good and evil, but that God was not really an important part of his life.

"For me while I was using, drugs were my God," he observed. "I had no deeper love than for the drugs — including myself."

But Jeff now believes that while he'd forgotten God, God never abandoned him. "I may not have chose to go with God," he said, "(but) God has always been with me. He's helped pull me through situations that I wouldn't have got out alive."

Three days after his plea to God, Jeff was in a car that was stopped by the police. They checked his background, and found that he was wanted in Rochester on burglary charges. He was sent back to Rochester, where he spent three months in Monroe County Jail while being tried and waiting sentencing.

During this period, Jeff began attending

meetings run at the jail by Rogers House, Corpus Christi Parish's home for ex-offenders. "I was reluctant at first, but I knew I needed some guidance and direction in my life," Jeff said.

After the judge allowed him to plea bargain for five years' probation instead of a stint in state prison, Jeff agreed to live at Rogers House. He remained there for six months, and then moved to the half-way house.

Today he is looking forward to completing his high school degree and getting vocational training. And for the first time in years, he is actually looking forward to Christmas.

"Christmas (before) was a time of aggravation, frustration, disappointment, and a big party," Jeff said.

"This Christmas," he added, "I'm able to look at the true spirit of Christmas — the celebration of Christ's birth and what that means to the world and individuals."

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