

# graduation 1994

## A triumphant return from the abyss of abuse

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

GREECE — By graduating from high school, teenagers take a big step in their pursuit of a fulfilling life.

"Paul" — his name has been changed to protect his identity — experienced a different, and even more monumental, kind of graduation ceremony last October.

It signified his desire just to stay alive.

With approximately 50 friends and family members present, Paul officially ended his 10-month stay at Park Ridge Chemical Dependency Center's Adolescent Community Residence in Greece.

The ceremony reflected a stirring turnaround for Paul, who had been led to the center after years of drug and alcohol abuse — and even a suicide attempt.

"It was just really intense. My dad got up and cried, and that was incredible. I got up to speak and I didn't do so well, either," Paul said.

The challenge to hold his emotions in that day, however, was nothing compared to the challenges facing Paul when he arrived at Park Ridge. In this article, Paul chronicles his descent into alcohol and drug abuse, followed by his recovery efforts.

### Pressure to fit in

Paul got drunk for the first time when he was 12 years old.

"I got sick and all the good stuff, but it was still fun. I liked it a lot. It was like a boost to my self-esteem; it made me feel a lot better.

"My friends had older brothers and we wanted to be like them. There was a lot of pressure to fit in with them.

"It started to become a more regular thing. They would basically supply us and it became a weekly thing."

As a freshman at a Catholic high school in Monroe County, Paul ran cross-country. He also began getting drunk before practices.

"A couple of friends starting bringing (alcohol) into school in thermoses. Most of the kids knew, but kids don't turn each other in."

Paul's habits were not yet widespread in his sophomore year; however, his relationship with alcohol was a consistent one.

"A lot of friends live in homes where parents have multiple liquor cabinets ... they didn't notice it was missing.

"My grades were still good, and I was in a (parish) youth group and playing violin — just doing regular stuff."

### Semi-social to abuse

A high-school student's first part-time job can often contribute toward maturity and stability.

For Paul, he took some steps in the other direction the summer after his sophomore year.

"I got a job in a restaurant and that was the beginning of the blowout. There was a lot of drinking, and I got into pot and acid that summer. I was already experiencing blackouts."



Jennie Militello, a counselor at Park Ridge Chemical Dependency Center, spends a light moment with 'Paul.'

Paul isn't quite sure how his first sampling of marijuana came about.

"I just remember waking up and there was a pipe in my hand."

He also tried LSD for the first time. "I didn't like it, but everybody told me it was a great thing."

As his junior year began, Paul's behavior was becoming noticeable.

"I couldn't get my act together. My (cross-country) coach was worried that something was up."

Yet Paul, an only child, acknowledged that his parents "were clueless. They didn't want to believe that a nice suburban kid doing good stuff would have a problem. It never crossed their minds.

"I had set it up so I could always have somebody around when I was drinking, because at religion class they had said that drinking alone was bad. So I thought everything was fine."

In the ensuing months, Paul's life became completely unraveled.

"I had changed my habits from semi-social to abuse. My

junior year was my bottom, by far. I participated in (law-breaking) activities I felt shameful of in order to obtain more alcohol and drugs."

At this point, Paul was drinking a quart of hard liquor per day and simultaneously taking two to three other drugs. He also attempted suicide on New Year's Eve.

### Unlocking the door

Finally, somebody decided to give Paul the help that he was not giving himself.

"My best friend had basically had enough. He turned me in to the drug and alcohol counselor at our school and made me tell my mom and dad."

Paul spent that summer as an outpatient at the Discovery Huther-Doyle treatment facility in Webster. Rather than return for his senior year of high school, he sought further rehabilitation by entering a 30-day in-patient program at Park Ridge Chemical Dependency Center, located on the campus of Park Ridge Hospital.

"I felt better about myself. My self-esteem had improved; it was like a shot of adrenaline to

a dead-tired runner."

Yet Paul and his counselors agreed that his recovery was not complete. In December, 1992, he began a 10-month stay in the Adolescent Community Residence at Park Ridge.

"I kind of wanted it. I knew I needed it, because there was still a lot of stuff I wasn't telling. The 30 days helped unlock the first door, but I still had a maze to go through."

Jennie Militello, Paul's primary therapist at Park Ridge, noted that a lengthier stay would be valuable for his entire family.

"We felt that (Paul) could benefit from the stability and consistency of the environment. And his parents were still in tremendous denial — this is very typical of the parents," said Militello, who also works three hours per week as a drug and alcohol issues counselor at Our Lady of Mercy High School.

The 24-bed Park Ridge Adolescent Community Residence is the only facility of its kind in the Rochester area — "the waiting list is ridiculous," Militello remarked. Treatment costs are determined on a sliding-fee scale.

There, Paul and his fellow

patients embarked upon a regular daily schedule which included chores, classes, and a wide range of individual and group therapy. Through this regimen, he became sober and has remained so.

"It was the best 10 months of my life. We were all like brothers and sisters. It was tough to leave; the thought of coming out to a place where I hadn't done so well before was scary."

Militello noted that patients' lengths of stay are determined by family environment, emotional stability and willingness to be open about their substance abuse. In Paul's case, she said, "He had an awful lot of strength — tons and tons of strength he didn't even know he had."

### 'You don't need it'

After leaving Park Ridge, Paul returned home to his parents and began taking high-school classes at Monroe Community College. He recently received his diploma and is planning to attend LeMoyne College in Syracuse this coming fall.

Overall, his life of sobriety has been a joyful one.

"I come home and sit down and have dinner with my parents for an hour, no TV. I go for walks with my mom and the dog. We have our tough moments, but it's a lot better.

"I go out to movies, go running with my dog and hang out with sober kids who were in the program. I've become re-involved with my (church) youth group and it's been great. Before I didn't have much faith at all. It hasn't been like 'wham, I'm back', but I've been able to develop my own sense of spirituality and my belief in God is starting to be re-established.


"A lot of people knew I was missing, but didn't know I was in rehab. A guy called me up to go party, and I said 'I don't want to so I'm not going to.' I've been places where I've been offered marijuana, and when I say, 'No thanks, I don't do that anymore,' I get weird looks.

As far as alcohol goes, "You don't need it. It's not an important factor in life. If you experience it, do it the right way — in moderation, at the right age. For the most part, it's going to get you in trouble."

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