

Hooked On Recovery

May 27, 2005

Incredible! Amazing!

I'll be forty-six this year, seventeen years of recovery under my belt and I'm pretty much at peace with my life. I do have some regrets though. For instance, I wonder what it would have been like if I had gone to that small oceanography school up on the coast of Maine. I regret not sticking with tennis as a teenager. And I wonder what would have happened if I had stayed in the golf profession. But without a doubt, my biggest regret in life is how the divorce affected Colleen, my first child. I've had thirteen years of telephone calls, weekend visits, dinners out and summer vacations. I wonder what influence my not being under the same roof has had on her childhood. Colleen was just three years old when we separated. And now my baby girl is graduating from high school next week. Funny thing is she's no longer a baby, she's no longer a girl (her senior prom pictures certainly prove she's a beautiful young woman), yet she's still my baby girl.

When we first separated, I struggled to maintain contact. I found it very difficult to call my daughter. What do you say to a three year old who misses you desperately? Plus, I had to fly through all the emotional flak of talking with her mother; it hurt, really hurt. Finally, I asked Colleen how often she wanted me to call her and her response grounded me, "Daddy, call me every day." And for the most part I have kept my end of the bargain. I wrote a little manual called "Tips for a Telephone Dad" to help me through those times.

During this early separation time, I shared at an AA meeting one night about how the world was treating me unfairly, how I was misunderstood, how it was everyone else's fault... waaaa waaaaa waaaa. After the meeting my sponsor pulled me aside, put his big finger in my face, and with a quiet forcefulness said, "You can get bitter, or you can get better. The choice is yours." And he walked away. He didn't want to hear anymore of my "poor me" rant. He knew that a "poor me" attitude has a tendency to turn into a "pour me another drink" episode. Plus, nobody likes a whiner and I had whining down to an art form. So thanks to his confrontation, I've tried to get better and stem the tide of bitterness when it creeps in.

The thing about having some time in recovery is you gain perspective; in other words you finally grow up. The theory in the rooms is that the time you start drinking and/or drugging addictively is the exact time your emotions stop maturing. So with that theory in mind, I might actually be an adult emotionally. Now, that's a "sobering" thought. And with moments like Colleen's upcoming graduation from high school and moving on to university, I can't help but get a little pensive...

Colleen was a very early talker; as a one year old she had an excellent vocabulary. We had a thing where I'd say, "Incredible!" and she'd reply "Amazing!", emphasizing her reply with a very cute shake of her head. Or she'd respond to "Amazing!" with an "Incredible!" My little Beano had a way of turning everything into an adventure. We caught crayfish, set up fish tanks and walked in the woods. I told her a lot of stories, most of them made up, yet she loved them. I recall one about an orange-eating fifty-foot friendly snake that lived under a trailer in Florida. We set up Smokey the Cab Driver, my first sponsor. Smokey had a thing where he would give a kid \$20 if they could repeat his full name. So I taught her to say, "Grovalo Smokavitch Amarico Dibatista Cordeliahoffer". We'd practice in the car on our trips back and forth. You shoulda

seen the look on his face when a seven-year old girl recited his name perfectly and succinctly. She was one of only two kids to ever get him. And he paid too!

In many ways, the divorce forced me to be a spectator, to watch from the sidelines of her life. I watched her first dramatic performance in the Three Piggy Opera, watched her play the violin and the clarinet, watched her in talent shows, watched her play field hockey, basketball and softball. I've listened to stories of thrown snowflakes and thrown blocks. I've seen her win awards. I've attended art openings. The most precious times are when she's with me. We have shared Cape Cod together, taken long walks together, taken long car rides together, discussed life together... just not often enough. I held her when tragedy struck because of the untimely death of her beloved grandfather. I've watched her grow more and more beautiful every year. I'm going to watch her graduate. This will be another emotionally tough time for me, but for all the right reasons. It's emotional because I love her so much...

One key to raising children is knowing how much rope to give. The younger the child, the less rope given. As they get older, you give them more rope until finally, you let the rope go. With Colleen, I've never really had control of the rope. I have always tried to do the next right thing. I've made mistakes. I have tried to be a steady, stable influence on her life. Only time will tell if this has been true. Recovery has allowed me to handle the situation to the best of my ability. I do know that being her dad, has been one of the most incredible experiences of my life. No...

Amazing.

Hooked on Recovery is a biweekly message from CCAR Executive Director Phillip Valentine, person in recovery since 12/28/87, devoted husband, a father of five and one more in a long line of surf fishermen. These thoughts, views and opinions reflect on his personal recovery and are not meant in any way to speak for the entire recovery community. He welcomes all your comments and suggestions on this column, email him at phillip@ccar.us. Visit the website at www.ccar.us to read the entire series.