

THE BASEMENT PROJECT – MAKING A DIFFERENCE



Name: Michael (name changed)
Age: 45
Problem: 20 years drinking
Clean: 16 months

WHEN DID YOU START DRINKING?

The same time as many people I guess. I had left school, gotten a job and had a little money at the weekends to go out and have a drink with my mates. All my mates did it, so it was 'normal' wasn't it? Looking back even then, I remember latching onto the one or two who were going elsewhere to carry on drinking when the rest were going home. One night, after arriving home rather drunk my mum said to me "you need to go AA and get help!" I know at the time it was a bit of a joke. She doesn't remember saying it now. But I never did go, never thought I needed to. Little did I know, that 20 years later, alcohol would bring me to my knees.

WHY DID YOU?

That's a big question, and I'm not sure I will ever know the answer. Looking back, I can't complain about my upbringing. I had a normal home life like everyone else I knew, mum and dad were always happy, never argued, didn't drink, didn't smoke and both worked hard. They were not 'huggy' parents and maybe I just felt a little unloved, I don't really know. I was the middle kid with an older brother and younger sister but I don't recall them being treated any differently than me.

Drinking always seemed to make me more comfortable around other people. I was relaxed, no anxiety etc., especially when going around town. I was scared stiff of any violence and fighting, I think mainly because I was bullied at school.

WHEN DID IT BECOME A PROBLEM?

I'm not sure I can answer that. There's an invisible line you cross from being a heavy drinking to becoming addicted and I don't know when I crossed that line. I was always the "piss head" whenever I was out with friends. I would be the one who had to go to a nightclub when others were heading home after the pub. I was always the last one at the bar. Even at 17 I would buy a bottle of rum and drink it neat on the way to the pub. I think that's what they call "pre-loading" now.

I had met all my girlfriends through drink and later met my wife too. Surprise surprise she was a drinker and had her own issues about her past. We got into the habit of persuading each other (not that it was that hard) that we would have a drink in the evenings after work. It got to the point where we were both buying booze on the way home just to be sure we had enough in the house. I had a lot of pressure at work and she had a lot of issues inside about her past. Either way, we both felt "better" with having a drink. However, my wife's drinking got worse and she was aggressive with it (I'd just get silly and daft). She would want to fight and argue all the time. I got to the point of not wanting to come home after work, and when I did, I would just head for a drink to ease any anxiety.

Our drinking got worse and eventually we divorced. I was left lonely, renting a small flat and found I couldn't stop drinking. I was severely depressed at this stage. Work started to suffer and I was drinking more than ever. I visited my GP to try and get help. She was more interested in the fact that I had driven there and smelt of alcohol than trying to help me. I left feeling ashamed and worried the police would be waiting for me around the corner as I left the GP's practice.

I carried on drinking for another two years until eventually I lost my job.

WHAT MADE YOU GET HELP?

I thought losing my job would have been a big enough wake up call for me to get help, but I just drank more. I was waking up not knowing what time or day it was and drinking. It's all I did. I was making myself very ill. I went to my doctors (I had now moved to Halifax) who referred me to my local 'Substance Misuse Service'. I attended some counselling sessions and meetings about cutting down. I couldn't seem to cut down though. Once I started I couldn't stop, I didn't care but eventually agreed to have a home detox and ended up back in my childhood bedroom of 20 years ago with my parents looking after me once again.

WHY THE BASEMENT PROJECT?

I stayed sober for about 6 months, but the pressures of everyday living, opening post, looking for work, seeing my son and rowing with my ex started me drinking again – it was worse than it had ever been before. I seemed to live in a fog of black-outs and suicidal thoughts. SMS couldn't do anything else for me and suggested that I try the Basement in Halifax.

After talking to people at the Basement, I felt they knew more about me in five minutes than my councillor did after 12 months. Someone said "Alcoholism is not about drinking". Well that was news to me, and I had to find out more. On leaving the meeting I was told, "There is hope."

I was invited along to a new detox programme and attended every session. It's hard hitting and teaches you just how arrogant and selfish you are through drink. It also teaches you about the nature of the illness (yes I believe I have an illness). After 4 weeks I had another home detox and then attended 12 further weeks about abstinence and recovery.

WHERE WOULD YOU BE NOW?

A homeless drunk I guess, or even dead, I really hate to think about it.

HOW ARE YOU NOW?

I'm good. Life is looking better. It's now 16 months since I had a drink. I still visit The Basement Project and do some voluntary work. I see people come through the door with the exact same arrogance and resentment as I had. I sit back and think to myself "there is hope".

