

Even “Perfect” Neighbors Feel the Stigma of Addiction

Living on the east side of Findlay in the early 1970s, Nancy Hutchinson fit right in to her neighborhood. The mother of two sons, Hutchinson taught at what are now Whittier Elementary, Lincoln Elementary and Donnell Middle School while her husband held a good job at a local company. The family belonged to a neighborhood swim club and Nancy was friendly and outgoing. The only thing that didn't fit was her drinking.

A recovering alcoholic since 1990, Hutchinson can tell you just when she began to find the taste of alcohol appealing.

“I was at my grandparent's Golden Wedding Anniversary Celebration at their house and my aunt let me have a glass of champagne mixed with 7-Up. I just remember how good it was, how good it made me feel and going back for more. I was 13-years-old.”

Raised in a strict Southern Baptist home, Hutchinson was taught that drinkers “went to hell.” Her father, she recalled, had grown up with intense rage. She felt that you had to be perfect to be loved. She remembered lots of “controlled drinking” while visiting her boyfriend in college; a boyfriend that she would ultimately marry.

“I really liked drinking,” Nancy said. “I also learned that people don't go to hell if they drink.”

After the birth of her second son, Hutchinson began drinking more with her neighbors and alone at home. Nancy saw a local physician who prescribed Valium for her depression. Unaware of the consequences, she continued to drink while taking the medication. Her physician had never warned her that mixing the two could be dangerous. She still managed to stay in her teaching position, but her marriage ended.

In 1984, acutely depressed and drinking, she was admitted to Blanchard Valley Hospital's Orchard Hall. After a few days, she went home. . . alone. A second trip to Orchard Hall brought the recommendation that she should attend recovery support meetings. She stayed sober for a month or two, but life was too hard and she quit going to meetings.

One day in 1990, Nancy walked into her classroom and realized that she couldn't handle things anymore and felt she was in danger of losing her job. She called her psychiatrist and asked for help. The doctor suggested either having a friend stay with her in Findlay or hospitalization in nearby Fostoria Community Hospital.

“I was still so worried about the stigma of alcoholism that I didn't want anyone from Findlay to find out,” Nancy said. “I wound up going to Flower Hospital near Toledo. What was supposed to be a 21 days stay turned into 28 days.”

The professionals at Flower told Nancy that her best chance for success in beating her alcohol addiction would be to live in a recovery house. There was room for her in such an

environment in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin area. The residents, she discovered, were all professionals; doctors, attorneys and teachers.

“It hit me that alcoholics weren’t just those people who lived under the bridge. They were people we see and work with every day.”

Nancy spent a month in Wisconsin and returned home the day before Thanksgiving, 1990. She’s been sober ever since entering Flower Hospital, but will always refer to herself as a “recovering alcoholic.” There’s much professional debate on whether alcoholism can be cured, but Hutchinson is adamant.

“I know that if I took one drink, I’d be drinking heavily again in no time. I pray I will always be in recovery.”

Hutchinson is now serving for a second time on the Hancock County ADAMHS Board. She was on the board several years ago, but because it was early in her sobriety she had difficulty dealing with some of the issues and resigned. Now she is serving a three-year term and wants to call attention to the good programs that the Board administers.

The controversy last spring over a proposed recovery house in Nancy’s old neighborhood had her disappointed and puzzled. She can’t help but take some of the comments about people recovering from addiction personally.

“Addiction is not a choice,” she added. “It’s a disease for which there is effective treatment, and one of the most effective is living in a recovery home in a stable neighborhood. As far as a concern for children’s safety around those in recovery, my employer allowed me to come back to work and continue teaching. I think a lot of folks in Findlay have a mistaken idea of the type of people who are in recovery.”

Hutchinson’s 24 years of sobriety are proof to her that the recovery process works. She continues to attend recovery support meetings and serve as a mentor to other women with similar experiences to her own. Perhaps she will be most helpful in encouraging others to seek and receive help by just telling her story.

“Recovery is beautiful,” Nancy smiled. Looking at her sipping coffee and realizing just how far she’s come, one has to agree.

(This interview is written by Barbara Lockard and is presented with the express permission from Nancy.)