

GUEST VIEW (*February 15 – 16, 2016, The Courier*)

When alcohol takes over

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first of two columns about a Findlay man's struggle with alcoholism.

By BARBARA LOCKARD

For the past six years, Matt Dysinger has been spending “happy hour” with a group of close friends. Not much different than how he spent that hour after work seven years ago, except now he spends it sober.

A successful professional, former high school and collegiate swimmer and father of two daughters, Dysinger had always traveled in Findlay's inner circles. His parents were well known in the community; his mother a teacher and counselor and his father a Marathon Petroleum Corp. executive. He had friends.

That he spent a meet or two swimming drunk went unnoticed by his family and coaches. Matt liked alcohol. He still likes alcohol. But he's no longer spending his life under its control.

“It was clear that I liked alcohol from age 16,” he recalled. “I have the world's greatest parents, but in Findlay, it was hard to escape their oversight.”

He discovered his penchant for drinking on a trip to an out-of-town wedding with a friend's family. The two 16-year-olds arrived at the reception early and were served champagne. One glass led to several. The friend's father good-naturedly turned his back and let the boys celebrate.

“I felt like someone was tickling the back of my eyeballs,” Matt laughed. “Unfortunately, I spent the next 32 years trying to get that feeling back. I was looking for the perfect buzz.”

Dysinger didn't drink again until his senior year at Findlay High School. He and a friend got drunk before a swim meet to celebrate his 18th birthday. “It was an easy meet,” he remembered. “I don't think anyone noticed.”

The summer after high school graduation is memorable for most of us. It's a time of saying good-bye to childhood and also a chance to hang out with certain friends for the last time before college. For Dysinger, it meant trading his high school group of friends for those who embraced a riskier lifestyle.

“I remember sneaking into a guy's basement when we thought his parents weren't coming home,” he said. “We filled water glasses with Jack Daniels and then we heard his folks coming in the door. We all chugged our drinks and acted like nothing was going on.”

Later that night, he clearly remembered this same group of friends driving up the wrong side of North Main Street, and up the ramp to the Findlay reservoir and driving the walking path.

It wasn't the only time that he would escape consequences for being "under the influence."

Dysinger's aquatic talents had landed him a spot on Louisiana State University's swim team. At last, he would be out of town and out of the reach of parents and family.

"I was a little bit sheltered at home and, at LSU, I had complete freedom. I quit the swim team the first year because I wanted to party."

Dysinger vividly remembers a crawfish boil that his dorm group had planned. Faced with bad weather and few guests, "three or four" of them consumed a keg of beer. After he slept for a few hours, he decided it would be a good time to visit his girlfriend across town. He made an illegal left turn, in full view of a police car, onto his girlfriend's street. He slid on the wet pavement and hit a parked car and a tree.

"I just remember climbing out of my car and seeing a cop with his gun drawn," he said. "I thought, wow, am I ever in trouble now." Dysinger's father called the admissions counselor at LSU that had worked with them and told him Matt's story. The counselor found an attorney, who was a friend of a judge. Arrangements were made and Matt escaped with only a fine.

Dodging the consequences of his actions became a common occurrence.

Leaving Louisiana before graduation, he returned to Findlay and moved in with his parents, a visit that would last two years. He received his first DUI during this time. Still, he was working and doing well financially.

"I was drinking at least a sixpack every night and wasn't feeling too great," he recalled. "So I quit drinking for four or five days and felt a lot better. But, in some convoluted way, feeling better gave me the green light to start drinking again."

He continued to work, and drink. At age 29, he married a dentist and purchased a home in one of Findlay's "prestigious" areas. They had two daughters.

"It would take me all day to do the yard work because I drank the entire time. When we'd go out with other couples, I'd often talk them into forgetting about dinner and just sit at the bar all night."

Dysinger had a good job, a great house, and lots of friends.

"I was impersonating a sober person," he said sadly. *Lockard, of Findlay, is a freelance writer. She wrote this while volunteering for the ADAMHS board. Tomorrow: Dysinger confronts his demon.*

Breaking the relationship with alcohol

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second of two columns about a Findlay man's struggle with alcoholism.

By BARBARA LOCKARD

Findlay resident Matt Dysinger is an area business professional and father of two. He began drinking at parties and with friends while still a student at Findlay High School.

During college, his drinking increased and his alcohol consumption grew when he returned to Findlay to begin his career. According to Matt, he had it all: a wife and daughters, loving parents, an expensive home and a successful business. Still, he was "impersonating a sober person." He and his family needed to come to terms with his alcoholism.

After 18 years of marriage, Dysinger began to divorce. It was difficult and lengthy, but he doesn't remember thinking about that aspect.

"All I knew was that I was moving out and going to live in a motel. I was finally free ... free to do whatever I wanted and that was to drink. I took four suits, four ties, a gallon of gin, a gallon of vodka and two cases of Miller Light. I made sure I moved the liquor in before my clothes," he recalled.

At the first family Thanksgiving celebration since his uncle had passed away, the group decided to drink a toast to his memory, using the uncle's favorite liquor, gin. Matt hated gin, but was the last to receive the glass and held onto it and drank the contents over the course of the afternoon.

"I couldn't believe it. I actually taught myself to like gin martinis," he said, shaking his head.

Living by himself gave him more freedom to spend a good part of his days and nights drinking. He still managed to show up at his office, but came in late and took early lunches to fortify himself with more alcohol. He finally realized that he needed help.

"I called a recovering older friend whom I had always enjoyed and he gave me the name of a facility," remembered Dysinger.

Check in hand, he admitted himself for a 28-day stay. It was not a good match. The rules at the facility were unbendable, with no smoking permitted.

Matt asked for help with his anxiety and received no support. When his parents came for their first visit, he left with them. It was back to Findlay and back to drinking.

Finally, one Saturday morning as Matt sat at home by himself, family members staged what professionals would call "an intervention." His father, who had done extensive research on alcoholism, orchestrated the event.

"I remember them all lining up, telling me I needed to get help," he said. "I think the worst part

was my daughter telling me how disappointed she was in me.”

This time, he located another facility and found that he “clicked” with the staff, many of them in recovery themselves. Still, he felt he would only need a few days to straighten out and go on with his life in Findlay.

“There was an emphasis on education and that spoke to me,” he said. “I needed to know why I was addicted to alcohol. They had a treatment plan for me and it felt like a very safe environment, so I stayed. When I got out, I found a sponsor and a local 12-step program.”

The program met later in the evenings and that didn’t work well for Dysinger. He finally connected with five or six individuals that he calls his “happy hour” group. This support system has helped keep him sober for the past six years, but, although he had stopped drinking, he doesn’t feel that recovery began for another two years.

“I had spent 32 years being broken,” he remembered. “I learned that I didn’t deal well with anger. My way was always the right way. I also did some deep soul-searching. I didn’t really practice religion in college, except to pray like crazy when I was in trouble,” he laughed.

As a result of his introspection, Dysinger realized that there were many others in the community who were telling *his* story. As he listened, he learned that many substance abusers have always had feelings of inadequacy.

“I began to realize that I had something to offer to others. That’s when recovery really started.”

He admits he had a “thinking problem and a drinking problem.” “I used to act first, then think. Now, I think, then act.”

Today Dysinger serves on the Recovery Oriented System of Care Committee of the Hancock County Board of Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services. He continues as a Findlayarea business professional and enjoys a good relationship with his daughters.

The best part is he is no longer “impersonating a sober person.” He is one. *Lockard, of Findlay, is a freelance writer. She wrote this while volunteering for the ADAMHS board.*