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Love and help collide, detouring one man's life of drug addiction and crime

BY NATE TAYLOR

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Dana Elworthy has stabbed a man, lived homeless for months at a time, been to jail and prison, been hooked on meth and had a blood alcohol content of 0.62 - an amount high enough to easily kill most who aren't alcoholics.

He's also diagnosed as bipolar and has abused alcohol and drugs for his entire adult life.

"I've lost everything in life two or three times," he said.

And after about 30 years of making bad decisions while trying to cope with his mental illness, he's found the motivation in his life to live a clean and sober lifestyle.

His motivation is Bessie King, the love of his life and the woman he says gives him purpose in life.

"I got more to live for now," Elworthy said on a recent afternoon from the home in Fort Collins that he shares with King. "I used to only think about where my next drink was coming from ... but if I went back to that life now, it would kill me."

From 1982 until 2006, the now-47-year-old Elworthy racked up more than 20 misdemeanor arrests and seven felony convictions in Larimer County. Since entering the Alternatives to Incarceration for Individuals with Mental health needs, or AIIM program, in July of 2006, Elworthy has not found himself in handcuffs again.

Elworthy has been sober since June 20, 2005, and he even quit smoking cigarettes last year.

He said he gives credit to King and AIIM for helping him turn his life around before his brain "turned to mush" from drinking too much.

Homeless, mentally ill, drunk, high and a criminal

Today, Elworthy weighs roughly 220 pounds.

When he was constantly high on meth, he weighed just 125 pounds and would go days without eating or sleeping.

"The place I let meth take me was on the road to nowhere," Elworthy said. "I'd always wanted to drink alcohol, but when I got hooked on meth, it was even more important than alcohol."

Elworthy said he started drinking and smoking marijuana in high school and committed his first crime - pawning a stolen item — at age 17.

After graduating from high school, Elworthy said he, his mother and a psychiatrist all agreed he had a serious problem, and he was admitted to a Boulder psychiatric institution. He was eventually diagnosed bipolar.

Soon, he joined the Navy but had a "nervous breakdown" and was honorably discharged.

"Nothing's been the same since I went into the Navy," Elworthy said. "After that nervous breakdown, I never could live on my own or keep a job."

Alcohol and drugs, especially marijuana, Elworthy said, became a coping mechanism for his problems. Despite efforts from his family to help him, Elworthy would frequently find himself homeless and drunk.

"He came and stayed with us for a while, but then I just had to put him out," said Elworthy's father, Richard Paul, 76, of Loveland. "He was getting into trouble, sleeping outdoors part of the time, I guess. (Police) would pick him up, and he was either asleep or passed out under a bridge in Fort Collins."

Elworthy said after one day of heavy drinking by the Poudre River at some point in the mid-'90s, he passed out and woke up in an emergency room.

He had a blood-alcohol content of 0.62, nearly eight times the legal driving limit of 0.08.

"I used to get the shakes," Elworthy said. "I had to have alcohol to stop me from shaking so bad."

A majority of Elworthy's crimes have been misdemeanors, and experts have determined his mental illness and substance abuse have contributed to his criminal activity.

But in 2005, Elworthy's criminal activity reached a pinnacle when he said he stabbed a man while he was drunk during a dispute involving a woman.

"I've got seven felony convictions that are all due to drugs and alcohol," Elworthy said.

Finally, a turnaround

Sometime in 2005, Elworthy and King started dating for a second time. The first go-around for the couple had ended a few years prior, partially because of Elworthy's substance abuse. The second time around, King put her foot down.

She kicked Elworthy out of the house when he refused to quit drinking. At the same time, Elworthy had been sentenced to the AIIM program, which focuses on treating mental illness and achieving sobriety.

Elworthy said between King's tough love and his experience with AIIM, he finally realized he wasn't going to change unless he had a purpose in life.

He said King is that purpose.

"I look forward to doing the right thing when I'm with her," he said.

As for the AIIM program, Elworthy credits his probation officer, Kim Mayhew, for caring more than any

other person he's dealt with in the criminal justice system.

"I'd recommend that program to anyone that needs help," Elworthy said of AIIM. "Because nothing else worked for me, except that."

Mike Ruttenberg, the clinical director of Larimer County Community Corrections, said he fondly remembers Elworthy and said his successful lifestyle post-AIIM is fairly typical for those who complete the program. Those who completed the program between Jan. 1 and Dec. 31, 2009 have not been jailed since.

Conversely, there are now 37 individuals in the AIIM program who combined to spend about 3,000 days in jail in the year prior to being sentenced to AIIM.

"We're seeing a reduction in all their utilization in community resources," Ruttenberg said, referring to police and hospital services, among others. "Looking through the list of our successful completion, they're all doing fantastic."

King says even though Elworthy killed a few brain cells over the years, he's finally grown up.

"He's made a lot of changes," she said. "I guess he's grown up, and that's the best way to put it."

Elworthy said he's confident he'll never return to his old ways.

"As much as I care about Bessie, that's why I quit. I never cared about the consequences when I was drinking," he said. "But now I have her to thank for it, and I have her to care about."

Having been declared unable to work by the government, Elworthy collects disability payments through the military. After spending much of his life without a license due to multiple DUI arrests, Elworthy has a license, is ticket free and is making car payments for the first time in his life.

He spends most of his time with Bessie and visits his parents in Loveland at least once per week.

"We do see him about once per week, and you can't imagine the difference in him," Paul said. "We enjoy having him come and visit and help us do things. My wife and I both consider it more or less a miracle for such a turnaround like that."

After life of crime, man finds help to live sober (03:21)

Diagnosed as bipolar, Dana Elworthy has abused alcohol and drugs for most of his entire adult life. Until he found the motivation to try to live clean and sober



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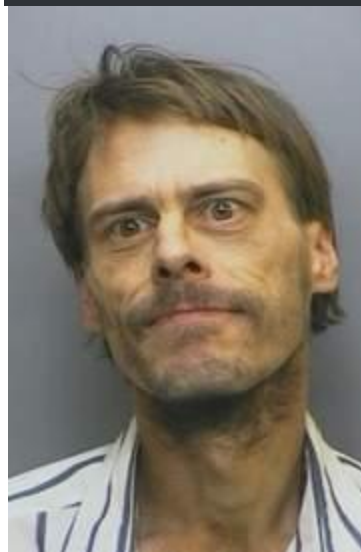
Dana Elworthy laughs as he speaks about the happiness he has found since he became sober and learned to manage his bipolar disorder. (Dawn Madura/The Coloradoan)



ELWORTHY IN 1999



ELWORTHY IN 1996



ELWORTHY IN 2005



ELWORTHY AGAIN IN 2005

<http://www.coloradoan.com/article/20100207/NEWS01/2070333/1001/NEWS/Love-and-help-collide-detouring-one-man-s-life-of-drug-addiction-and-crime>