

Henry
Marquette, MI
3/22/1989

On Growing Up with an Alcoholic Parent in the Upper Peninsula

START OF INTERVIEW

(Interviewer): This is an interview with Henry from Marquette, MI, March 22, 1989 born June 23 1965 originally from a small town in Marquette County in the Upper Peninsula. What we're going to be talking with Henry about today is his experiences growing up in a family in which his father was an alcoholic. Okay Henry, why don't you give me a little bit of background about where you grew up and what your family was like?

(Henry): Well like you said I grew up in a small town here in the U.P. and I guess there wasn't a lot to do in the U.P. in that small town, so we had to create our own activities as a kid. But as far as my family, I grew up with a brother and a sister, that's a fairly small family for around here, but my cousins, my uncle had a family he had quite a few kids, a large number of children, and we were always close to them. They grew up in our house as much as they were in their own house and we were in theirs, same thing. Also as far as the extended family – aunts and uncles and grandparents – we were always very close to them. We were always doing things together with them. Not quite sure what else you need me to tell you.

(I): I'd like you now to talk about any specific experiences that you had while you were growing up that were directly affected by your father's alcoholism, and how those affected you.

(H): My first memory of my father, when I started thinking that he was an alcoholic, I remember him coming home one time after a party smashed and, he wouldn't do it when he was sober he was incoherent, my sister said something to him and he gave her a backhand. I mean, I can picture, we remodeled our house so it's completely different now than when we moved into it, or different now than it was at that time and I can remember the print of the wallpaper from that exact instant when she went up against the wall when he hit her. It was very exact imagery on that. So this definitely had a traumatic thing for a six or seven year old kid. I also remember one time my dad coming home and getting in a fight with my mother and trying to choke her. I was glad to see that she wound up popping him one which took care of that but you know that's kind of traumatic or more funny ones that happened, you know you had to keep a sense of humor if it's really that bad. My dad came home from a party one night and decided he wanted a little fresh air – hot July morning, early in the morning about three o'clock in the morning – he climbed out his bedroom window onto the roof and was standing on top of the roof on the peak of our roof and we had one of the highest houses in the town up on top of a hill overlooking the town and there he stood in his underwear on top of this roof. Made one of the neighbors call the fire department to get him down. I don't know if you want to hear any more...?

(I): Yeah you can go on.

(H): Well, it was always interesting, he'd go he had a tendency to go out when he'd get depressed. He'd be alright when he first had a couple drinks but then after he got carried away a little bit and he started

getting drunker and he got to a certain point all the time when he came home and had to come off the party atmosphere, and he always got depressed and talked about killing himself. So it was always like, you know, my older brother always took the role where he had to protect everybody so he was always going to stop him from killing himself which was a bad situation because it kind of puts him in a responsibility role where if something happened and he did kill himself it would kind of make him feel guilty. Thank God he didn't, but several times – my brother was behind him with a bottle one time ready to knock him over the head in case he got the gun cabinet open. We had hid the keys but there were glass doors on it. I remember one time he threw a gun out through the window. Found out that, okay he got his hands on a gun, but we had all the shells hidden for it so he just flipped it, my brother's brand new gun out the second story window and stuck it in a snowbank. That was kind of interesting. It was interesting that he always, when I'd bring my friends home at 14 or 15, and my brother and sister were older, when they'd bring their friends home, he would always, it was like we were competing for our friends – he would compete with us. Trying to win them away from us and to his side, and he didn't do it when he was sober as much but whenever he had a few drinks he always did that. It'd be interesting to see, and he had a real easy going manner, I mean at the time I was in high school I thought it was great – he didn't care if we drank, well he cared, but it wasn't like he was going to throw us out of the structure or anything if he caught us drinking lots of times he'd sit down and he'd drink with us. He said, "Okay if you're going to drink you drink with me." Well, lot of times once he got drunk and once we got drunk, we'd both lose our what we were thinking we should do and he'd change his decision and we'd go out and we'd ride around, the two of us drunk, driving in a car – kind of a bad image to set forth for your son. He used to all the time get into fights with friends of mine. That was when they were older, when they were physically matured and football players and macho and all of a sudden he had to prove that he was still young enough to take them. It was kind of a drag. That's all I can really come up with off the top of my head.

(I): Okay, what about other instances in your family? Maybe your uncle or your grandparents, was there any alcoholism around there?

(H): Yeah that's very interesting. My uncle I would consider an alcoholic. If you hadn't figured it out I consider my dad an alcoholic too, but I consider my uncle an alcoholic, he has mood changes that are amazing. When he's sober he's fine but when he's drunk he gets in one of two moods he either gets real nice and he'll give you anything or he gets nasty and mean and when he's on a hangover he gets nasty and mean. You just learn after a while to avoid him in that situation. It's really interesting that my grandfather was, again I've never met my grandfather, but from the stories I've been told by his wife and by his children, I believe him to be an alcoholic especially considering that he was drunk the day he died and he committed suicide. You know I think that's a strong tendency to call him an alcoholic. He did some outrageous things I know my dad always tells the story about the Christmas he came home and pulled the Christmas tree in, he was going to bring it in the house, you know went to cut the Christmas tree and got drunk doing it, so he was bringing it in the house he pulled it in and tipped the tree first and broke all the branches off. He also tells about the Christmas – Christmas seems to be a bad time – my dad tells me about the time where my grandfather came home and busted all his presents. My dad was only about seven at the time and you know, what do you think, your dad comes home and just smashes, stomps all over your presents and says, "There's no Christmas here." And he goes to bed. That kind of gives you a tendency to, I don't know, be unstable I would say. It's like he's leaving it wide open for him to have problems as well. I think the awareness will help though, I hope.

(I): Mhmm. What are some of the more personal effects it's had on you – consequences of your fathers, of all this, this prevalence of alcoholism – in your family?

(H): Well I know there's a tendency of me being an alcoholic. I know I have to watch it very closely. I was in the service for a while and while I was in service and first got out of the service I drank and blew once and in the service that was the thing you were supposed to do, but I gained the habit in the service, I formed the habit in the service. Every day I was getting drunk and my relationships were getting all screwed up. In high school I think the fact that my father was an alcoholic and he allowed us to drink, it had a big impression on us, and I mean, I was a partier – I had a party almost every weekend for an entire year, almost two years straight. I don't think a person who didn't drink would put up with that in their children, I don't know. Maybe, but I don't think so. He gave me a good role model – I saw who to follow and followed him. He did the same thing he was very much into parties, loved parties. So I'm enjoying them, I enjoyed his parties! As a little kid they used to let me be the bartender, I was the bartender at all the parties. Obviously when they turn their backs I'm going to sneak a little bit. So I started drinking, sneaking when I was little kid. I drank for the first time on my own, got my own alcohol, when I was twelve years old. My friends found me passed out in a snow bank out behind his house. That was an interesting day.

(I): What about other people, other kids your age? Do you find they have a problem with alcoholism and does that stem from their family, just in your own experience in the U.P.?

(H): Well the members of my family all started drinking at about the same time, speaking of the first time of drinking. Most of my friends didn't start drinking until myself and my family gave them a hard time and convinced them to start drinking. You know, "Come on, go ahead have a drink, have one, what the heck," you know, most of it started after that. So you kind of feel guilty about that, especially the ones that went on and became drug addicts, feel guilty that you started them but they were going to do what they were going to do you can't take responsibility for them. As far as the effects, not to get off the subject of myself, but I think the effects have an interesting result on my sister. She has a hard time making decisions. Not just a hard time, she, my family makes sort of a joke about it – we used to ask my sister when she was a little kid they used to ask her, "Do you want to stay at grandma's tonight?" and she couldn't decide if she wanted to stay at grandma's or come home and it got so bad that she would cry. She would sit there and cry because she couldn't decide if she wanted to go to grandma's or come home. You know that's not normal, there's something wrong there.

(I): And you think that was directly related to your father's drinking?

(H): I think it is. I think if we looked up in the literature we'd find that that sort of behavior is there, it's common. You know, I see it in other alcoholic families that I know of personally even, I see the role that my brother and sister and I have taken, just with us.

(I): Okay, and that, I did some research behind characteristics of children of alcoholics, and I'd like to run down about ten of them and you can respond whether you think that it's a characteristic of you or your brother or sister and why you think it is, or if it isn't why you think it isn't. Seeing things as all or nothing and black-and-white reasoning, do you find yourself thinking that way?

(H): I try not to. I think I might, but if I do, not as much as I could. I'm really wary of that. My brother is a very black and white person, point blank. This is right and that's wrong and there's no negotiating it. My sister can't decide. [laughs] Ah, no, but yeah I think if that's a characteristic of children of alcoholics my brother definitely shows it. It's kind of hard to look at yourself and decide whether or not you – I don't know I think I do somewhat – but I try. I pride myself in being able to look at the other person's side.

(I): Mhm. Okay, the second one is hyperventilating, looking around all the time I guess, that might be kind of paranoid.

(H): Paranoid? Let me, who, ___ doesn't know me! [both laugh] I don't know, again that's another one of those things that's hard to say about yourself. I've had other people say that maybe I do, but as far as my brother and sister I couldn't – I've never noticed it in them, I don't know.

(I): What about some of your cousins?

(H): Oh yeah, but, I mean when you get into eleven kids it's – other things could be working there because it's not in all eleven of them – but there are a couple of them that yeah, show paranoid characteristics.

(I): Okay – the need to control self, others, or environment?

(H): Yeah I like to be in control. I don't like to have people controlling me, I get paranoid when people are controlling me, when I perceive people in control of me. My brother is very controlling. He has to have everything exactly point blank his way, the black-and-white way, you know. See I don't want to put it in controlling figure of speech, I'd rather call it a leader/follower type thing. I like to be the leader and telling people what to do rather than people telling me what to do.

(I): Mhmm, that's also a characteristic. That stems from when you perceive, and tell me if this is something that you think, when you perceive that your father is drunk and isn't in control, do you feel like you have to take control of the family at that point, or you were saying something about your brother having...?

(H): Oh my brother did, yes. My brother said, "Okay, I'm in charge of this now and I'm going to take care of him and I'm going to do something about him." And it kind of got to be a rivalry with the two of them. As far as me I guess I did it more covertly. I mean, I didn't blatantly come out and say, "Hey, I'm in charge, you go do this." I just kind of like took charge of things and got them done. At least I thought I did.

(I): Okay, trouble with intimacy and isolation. Do you like your isolation? Do you have trouble in intimate relationships?

(H): I don't think there's any question about that – myself, my brother – I'm not sure about the females but I can pretty much say all the male cousins all, yes, are very cold. We do not share our feelings with people, it takes a lot. We have to very much trust them in order to share our feelings. Once we get to sharing our feelings, once we get to trust them, we'll share them. We'll probably go overboard because we haven't shared them with anybody else, but, no I don't like – I had a problem with that with my wife – she complains about that all the time. I can't just say, "This is how I feel," it takes a lot of prompting from her.

(I): Mhm. Okay, low trust or difficult trusting someone?

(H): Well that's kind of in the same ballpark. Yeah it takes a lot. Well, in general, I like to say that I'll trust anybody until they give me a reason not to, but I think again that's because I realize that I don't trust

people naturally and I have to go out of my way trust them. I go out of my way to stick to that. So if I didn't think about it I probably wouldn't trust people as much.

(I): And you think that stems from your experiences growing up?

(H): I don't know. That I don't know about. I suppose. It makes sense. I obviously couldn't trust what my parents were telling me when they'd tell me they were going to get me a bike for Christmas and gee, funny I never got that bike. But you know, I didn't really associate the two.

(I): Okay, fear of abandonment?

(H): Yeah, very much. I was afraid for a while before I got married – that was one of the reasons I was getting married – and it took me a little while to decide that that wasn't it, but I don't like being alone. If you want to torture me, put me in a room alone and that's torture enough. I went out to work with my cousin for a while in New Jersey and I was in a foreign place for a week all by myself and thought I was going to go bonkers there. When he finally came back I screamed at him for about an hour and told him, "Never do it again." I don't like to be alone so I suppose that would be fear of abandonment.

(I): Okay, avoidance of feelings _____?

(H) Yeah, I just avoid dealing with them. It's that's the same thing that I don't express my feelings to others, I don't think I express my feelings to myself. I'm not sure what causes what but I think it's related together because if I don't express them to myself, I don't have to express them to anybody else, then I don't have to deal with it.

(I): Does that stem from your childhood experience? In your own opinion do you think that has to do with interacting with your father?

(H): I don't know it was my father directly, but with my family. When you tell them how you feel nine times out of ten you get stomped on for it. If you were weak or feeling vulnerable they laughed at you for being a baby. If you were feeling aggressive they slapped you. Say, "Here, I'll give you aggressive," but it wasn't my father specifically. I suppose he did it too, but I think it was learning from my father and my extended family – my brother and sister and my cousins – did, you know, got the learning from them.

(I): Okay, difficulty with organization and planning?

(H): Gee, no, I'm not a very organized person. I have to admit this. [both laugh] I have little if any organization – just enough to get by and sometimes not even that. I go by the theory 'go with the flow' – well now I think I'd say I haven't thought about it until this very moment – one of the reasons I don't make plans is because they always seem to get changed. I guess that's something I learned while I was a kid. Every time we made plans – every time – something happened and boom plans didn't follow through. I wanted a bike for Christmas, they told me they were getting me a bike and the bike never came, you know. It always seemed like if you made plans, boom, they didn't follow through and you got depressed or you felt rejected. All your enthusiasm was stomped on. So if you didn't have enthusiasm – you didn't have expectations – your expectations couldn't be stomped on.

(I): You were saying earlier – this characteristic tendency to become an alcoholic?

(H): Oh yeah. They say that there's a strong genetic component in alcoholism for at least the male siblings of an alcoholic father. There's no question in my mind – I've got it. I've got to watch it. It's something that, as long as I want to drink – which I do – and most people can't argue with the euphoric state that alcohol puts you in is self-rewarding, it's great, but if I want to continue to be able to do that I have to keep myself on guard and closely watch my alcohol consumption.

(I): Super responsible or irresponsible?

(H): [laughs] I'm not super responsible, no. Irresponsible – I've been called it. I've been told I'm irresponsible. I try not to – I avoid that opinion. Yeah I guess I'm irresponsible in a lot of manners but I think I'm responsible in a lot as well. See that's one of those gray areas, it's not black or white, because I'm super responsible in some areas, and irresponsible in others.

(I): Okay, now I'd like to talk about some of the consequences you see in your other family members. You talked a little bit about that earlier but you might want to elaborate?

(H): I think it's interesting that I don't really see any labelled alcoholics in my family but in my cousin's – my uncle's children – I would predict, let's see, one...at least three of them are alcoholics. I know that four of them experienced bad troubles with drugs. Went definitely beyond the experimentation phase – they always introduced most of the modern drugs to our community back in the late '60s early '70's. I think that the divorce rate is related to alcohol. My parents were divorced, my uncles parents were divorced, my sister's been divorced, my brother's been separated several times and is on the verge of divorce. My uncles family – the oldest child is divorced, the second one didn't have a serious enough relationship to get married until he was thirty-five, the third one has been separated several times, the fourth child has been divorced twice, the next child – there's one good marriage, okay, they've had problems but nothing out of the ordinary. After that, the next child just got married at twenty-eight and it's the first substantial relationship he's ever had. The next child has been divorced, the next child has had two illegitimate children – never been married – the next child is married, who had married at a young age, unhappy at the moment with the marriage, and the last two children haven't yet experienced that sort of relationship – they're fairly young yet. So count up the divorces and marital problems in that family. In mine, it doesn't really leave a very good record, my marriage – and maybe I'm being overconfident saying my marriage is good – but my marriage and one in my uncles family out of eleven kids I would call good. That's not real good odds out of twelve, fifteen, sixteen couples two are making it – well there's more that are making it – but two are making it decent. Three that are still making it but are struggling.

(I): Okay, on that do you have any final points of interest that you'd like to talk about?

(H): Well if there's anything I want to say it's got to do with the adult children of alcoholics groups – I think they're wonderful. I think it provides an excellent opportunity for people with my experiences, that have seen things I have, that are experiencing the situations that I've experienced, can compare notes. Find out – hey we're not the only ones experiencing these things, having these problems – this isn't because we're strange or crazy because of the way we grew up. When you get together everybody has had the same experiences, or similar. So I think that's something that somebody should be applauded for.

(I): Okay, and that wraps this up, thank you very much!

END OF INTERVIEW