



CHAN CHAO, THE DIAMONDBACK, U. OF MARYLAND, COLLEGE PARK

Keith Kocarek led a double life — as student leader and gambling addict.

Gambler

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recalling a friendly game of poker when he was a Ohio State U. student. "I won a lot of money and I got such a high out of that." Kocarek eventually found himself facing angry fraternity brothers who had figured out he had taken about \$8,500 in fraternity money to gamble. He was arrested and an Ohio judge sentenced him to 30 days at a boys' school. His parents paid back the stolen money and Keith agreed to treatment, but he refused to face what he was. "I was planning how, on the day I got out, I was going to bet the money to pay my parents back," he said.

Kocarek was treated at Taylor Manor in Ellicott City, Md. - at the time one of only three gambling treatment centers in the country. He spent a week there, convinced he was cured.

After treatment, Kocarek enrolled at Maryland and joined the campus Sigma Alpha Epsilon chapter, marveling at the trust members showed even after learning about the experience at OSU. But he could not leave his past behind him.

Kocarek began betting again through his Ohio bookie, using some fraternity money that was in his charge. "I was paying back the debts from Ohio. As time went on, I guess the pressures of the past just kept coming down on me," he said.

Those pressures were alleviated by cocaine, which Kocarek found readily available. "I finally felt good and could move on without the pain becoming too strong or overbearing. Cocaine became my best friend."

Kocarek's energetic involvement in Greek affairs led his fraternity brothers to believe the separate phone line he had installed was for fraternity business. The line was used to make bets.

In August 1987, Kocarek resigned his IFC post, aware that the campus police knew about his stealing. By mid-September, he began destroying evidence linking him to fraternity funds.

Fearful of a confrontation, Kocarek fled to South Carolina where he knew he could stay at a friend's home and find something to bet on. He won \$1,500 that weekend, using some of it to pay for a life insurance policy he thought could cover his debts. "I knew I had to take my life. I spent the next few days planning the end. I hurt so much inside and I just wanted it to stop."

Kocarek made a few final calls to friends and loved ones the next day. He tried one last lie with his mother. "I tried to convince her everything was alright

with me, although my voice trembled on the phone," he said. "She had no idea anything was going on, and yet she knew better."

Unsure even now why, Kocarek got in his car and drove to Ohio. When he reached Columbus, Kocarek drove to the riverside and sat for about three hours, a loaded gun in his hand. "It was so quiet and peaceful, I couldn't cry," he said, his voice now a near-whisper.

"I picked up my hand which was holding the gun all this time, put it to my heart, pulled the trigger and it was finally over."

Kocarek woke up in a Columbus hospital. He had regained consciousness, but not his memory. That would come days later. "And I felt the exact same pain the day that I..." his voice trailed off. "When I first came to realize what had happened, I thought, 'God, I can't even kill myself right.'"

"Now, it doesn't even make sense. I was just going through actions and doing things and not knowing why and not knowing what I was doing."

With the help of Gamblers' Anonymous, Kocarek has learned much about himself and his illness. "When I first went into the hospital, to be honest, I had a hard time believing... it's a disease," he said. "I was thinking this is a behavioral problem, it's not an emotional problem or an addiction."

Kocarek credits his doctor with turning him around. "I spent God knows how many hours with this person in therapy without even a will to live. He gave me a lot of hope, and that's what I think makes the difference. He said things will change and things did change," Kocarek said.

The limitations Kocarek must now live with all involve being honest about his disease. "I'll never be able to place a bet or go to a casino. I can't control that. It does something to me, I guess, that it doesn't do to other people."

He also must allow others to handle his money. An accountant gets his paychecks from the two jobs he holds and pays the \$650 taken out of his salary each month toward the court-ordered restitution.

Keeping control of the money Kocarek does handle forces him to make choices most people take for granted. "You don't do anything impulsively," he said. "If I stop to grab a hamburger at McDonald's, I think about it: 'Do I need to? Should I? Should I wait until dinner?'"

What hurts now, though, is being cut off from the friends he once had at Maryland.

"I'm to the point now where I can walk on campus," he said. And if he should come upon a face from the past: "I'm prepared to deal with that."

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