

Recovering a life

■ What one woman thought was just a college phase turned out to be a lifetime battle against alcoholism

By Beata Mostafavi
Oregon Daily Emerald

For Kimberly Nelson, parties were a part of college life.

And she was just one student, among many, who saw alcohol as not much more than a remedy for boredom, just something to help her relax and socialize. She spent many nights drinking until she passed out, sometimes experiencing blackouts, and many of her friends seemed to be doing the same thing.

But when she woke up in a hospital emergency room years later, she also awoke to the reality that her drinking threatened her life.

She said that although many people come out of the college "phase" of heavy drinking, others, such as herself, discovered they had a disease called alcoholism.

"I knew what I was doing wasn't okay, but then everyone else was doing it," she said. "A lot of people come out of that phase, but I didn't. And when you cross over that line, you can't come back over."

Now a residential counselor at the Eugene drug and rehabilitation center, Serenity Lane, she has spent much of her life sharing her story and educating people about alcohol's potential to turn into someone's worse enemy.

Nelson recognizes many college students are in the same place she was, and they don't realize their drinking habits could ruin their lives. But being a student whose weekend extravaganzas went too far, the recovering 39-year-old hopes to help others before it's too late.

And she's also counting down the days to Dec. 2, 2001, her 12th sobriety birthday.

"The thing about this disease is

that it progresses even when you don't drink," she said. "You have to take it day by day."

Nelson had her first drink at age 14, and although she kept herself busy in high school with the rally team, string ensemble, Young Life and the varsity tennis team, alcohol and marijuana still managed to take a small part in her teenage life.

"In high school, I was in the experimental phase," she said. "But I was still in control."

In the beginning

Nelson attended Oregon State University in 1979 and moved into the residence halls with a friend from high school. At that time, drugs and alcohol still seemed harmless.

"It was so classic when we moved in," she said. "Our moms helped us decorate, and then the second they left, we pulled out our Southern Comfort and jar of pot."

The following summer, Nelson moved in with a few of her sorority sisters into a cabin in Lake Tahoe, Calif. Her drinking accelerated, and she was also introduced to cocaine.

"That's when it really started to affect my life," she said. "I was just having a lot of hangovers, not being responsible and not keeping jobs."

Nelson spent her junior year abroad in Germany, where she realized something was wrong. Her blackouts became more frequent, and she started to notice signs of alcoholism.

"I took some risks that were pretty stupid and life threatening," she said. "I was also depressed off and on, and I'd isolate, drink in my room and not answer the door sometimes. I knew I had a problem, but I just was not willing to give it up."

Nelson moved back to Eugene after graduation to work at her father's law firm, and her family also started to notice her drinking problem. After a year and a half, Nelson moved to Portland for work and also began to



Laura Smit Emerald

Kimberly Nelson is back on track, now that she's been sober for more than 11 years, and is happy she gets to see her two sons, including 3-year-old Jaeger, grow up.

see a psychologist and started using anti-depressants, but her drinking combated the medicine's effects.

Blind to reality

"I just wasn't honest about how much I was drinking," she said. "Denial is pretty amazing."

But after Nelson blacked out at her sister's graduation party, her friends and family knew she needed more help. Her mother and friend set up an evaluation appointment at New Day, a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center in Portland, and the counselors recommended she check in as a patient.

"I stayed sober for three and a half years," she said, "but out of fear and not wanting to disappoint my parents."

After treatment at New Day, Nelson moved to San Diego, where she worked for about a year and a half. But after a bad break-up and losing her job, she had a relapse and started drinking again.

She moved to Alexandria, Va., in 1989 and lived with her cousin, who was also in recovery, in hopes of get-

ting better. But shortly afterward, Nelson took an overdose of drugs mixed with vodka and ended up in the emergency room. Though Nelson considered suicide in the past, her near-death experience was in fact accidental.

"I had some really intense guardian angels working overtime," she said.

Taking responsibility

Nelson's parents brought her back to Eugene, where she checked into Serenity Lane. She had her last drink on Dec. 2, 1989.

"I suddenly realized that I couldn't get better for anyone but myself," she said. "And this time, I wasn't going to do it for my family or my friends. ... I was going to do it for Kim."

Nelson began working for the University part time and interned at Serenity Lane in the early 1990s. She got married, and soon after, she had two children: Jaeger, 3, and 6-year-old Wyatt, who has appeared with her in several Serenity Lane television advertisements and posters that read, "Another Serenity Lane Miracle."

Her co-worker, Jerry Schmidt, marketing director at Serenity Lane, said Nelson does her job wonderfully because of her positive attitude and appearance.

"The kids identify with her," he said. "People have such a stereotypical view of what drunks look like. ... They think of bums on the street."

Nelson also spends some of her spare time presenting information to elementary schools on request.

"She's just a star," Schmidt said. "She's willing to do anything if it will help just one person."

Although she had a history of alcoholism in her family, she said even those who don't have genetic factors are susceptible to alcoholism, especially during their college years.

"We can mess with our chemistry enough to get us into the mode of being physically dependent on [alcohol] ... where we have to have it in order to function," she said.

Everyone's at risk

Among teenagers who binge drink, defined as consuming 5 or more drinks in a row, 39 percent say they drink alone, 58 percent drink when they're upset, 30 percent drink when they are bored, and 37 percent drink to feel high, according to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence.

Dr. Scott Pengelly said younger people tend to dismiss the idea that they could have an alcohol problem.

"They think 'It's not gonna get me,'" he said. "They think it's a problem older people have because they can't handle alcohol. They say 'I won't have that problem. I'll know when to quit.'"

As a college student, Nelson had thought of drinking as a distraction, not something that would cause her pain in the future. But after seeing alcohol's potential for destruction and having lived sober for 11 years, she wants students to know that there is hope in leading a different lifestyle.

"This disease's goal is to alienate me from my loved ones and rob me of my self-esteem, and it almost did," she said. "But there is an alternative, and I'm grateful to be living a life of recovery."

University awaits impact of less-than-expected OUS budget

■ Funding cuts could mean tuition hikes, salary cuts and decreased enrollment

By Mandy Toomey
Oregon Daily Emerald

University faculty and staff remain hopeful in light of Gov. John Kitzhaber's 2001-2003 budget proposal for higher education.

As the biennium proposal, which is \$94.3 million less than that requested by the Oregon University System, makes its way through the legislative process, faculty and staff at the University are anxiously waiting to see what impact the budget could have on their departments.

"No one is talking about how, if

passed, the budget will work its way down through the state to the institution," said Jim O'Fallon, associate dean for academic affairs.

Some professors pointed out that there are areas that are more susceptible to cuts in funding than others.

"No one can talk in specific terms because no one wants to say where the vulnerabilities are," said James Earl, University Senate president.

Professors have pointed out that Kitzhaber has previously supported higher education, and they view this proposal not as an act against Oregon universities but as a reaction to the state of the economy.

"It is not a sign that he does not care about education but a decision made by someone with his back against the wall," said Mark John-

son, professor of philosophy and former department head.

Last year the state university system enacted a new funding model that tied higher education funding more closely with enrollment numbers. Under this new system, the school with the highest enrollment received a higher proportion of available funding.

"The model should work in our favor if we can maintain enrollment," Gage said. "No one would want to go back to the old way of doing it."

Johnson said most faculty members were optimistic last year because the state funding system for higher education changed.

"For the first time, the University had greater control over tu-

ition," he said.

Now facing a possible drop in funding, Johnson said that mood has changed.

"It's really disheartening to all the faculty to contemplate additional cuts just at the point when we could go ahead in a positive way and repair damage from the last decade," he said.

Now that funding is closely tied to enrollment, faculty members are nervous that increased tuition will have a negative effect on the number of new students. Kitzhaber's proposal sets a tuition increase of 8 percent, although the OUS requested an increase of only 5 percent to 8 percent.

"The worry is that the University will respond by increasing tuition, which could potentially

have the effect of decreasing enrollment," said Gage.

Faculty salaries are another important factor that could be affected by the budget plan. Earl said he believes salaries will be the first place cuts will be made.

"The salary plan is very vulnerable and the faculty is freaked out about it," Earl said.

Most departments recognize the importance of salaries in order to maintain competitive academic programs and realize that faculty members can be lured away by offers from other schools.

"We need to hire and maintain the best faculty in order to remain on the scene," Gage said. "Competitive salaries are needed to retain quality faculty."



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