

abuse, both sexual and physical, "That's part of the disease," she said.

Another part of the disease, Martha says, is "low self esteem. Since I controlled my drinking I don't have to live my life with low self esteem. When you stop drinking you get your feelings back. I have a sense of self for the first time in my life."

Martha was lucky in some ways; she was never arrested for drunk driving nor was she ever hospitalized because of the alcoholism. She says she had been drinking every day for several years before she sought help, "I never knew when I'd become inebriated. I never knew when or if I would lose control although I was not a blackout drinker. I had partial blackouts, called zebras."

"I knew I had a problem, but I didn't know what to do about it. Most of my friends were alcoholics; alcoholics run together, you know. Also, women tend to hide their alcoholism."

Martha says she was a real party person, "not trusted. And manipulative; I used people. Oh, I was used, too."

"It's demoralizing to turn to a substance to fix you. I thought I had a few living problems and maybe a drinking problem. Society, you know, condones alcoholism; society is set up to create addicts of one sort or another. And, the decision to accept one's alcoholism is very personal."

Martha stopped drinking by becoming involved with the Alcoholics Anonymous program. During the holidays Martha says she goes to "a lot of meetings. This is my third holiday season and the best one so far. The first one was very difficult with my family. And on the second, I wasn't around those people."

"This year I'm buying presents; something I haven't done for five years. Now I am dealing with myself and my own emotions. I am willing to change the relationships with my family and share with them. All of this is part of the 12 Steps in the AA program. I feel good about my life; something I haven't felt for years. My family now accepts me for who I am."

George also had a difficult time dealing with his alcoholism. He grew up in a Mormon family. He began drinking at the age of 19. He says he began drinking at one of two gay bars in his hometown. "I drank a lot," he says.

"I did become addicted to alcohol. I drank at work. I stayed home alone and drank for one period for nine months. And I always felt guilty. I started drinking at lunch when I was 21."

"All of my friends, at that time, were heavy drinkers. I had a lover for a while but we broke up and then I started getting into financial trouble. After my lover and I broke up I continued the facade of still having two incomes. I was also in psychotherapy, but I was trying to deal with the anxiety of my lifestyle, not the alcoholism." "My lifestyle," George says, "was all exaggeration and drinking. When I was drinking I felt totally alone at this time of year. I felt I had to buy into Christmas. I had to make compensation for my guilt."

"I lived in a world of denial. It is an expensive disease. The mess I was in was always associated with drinking. I wrote \$18,000 worth of bad checks which I had not remembered writing. I always denied doing things when I was drunk. It cost me more than \$65,000 to get myself off the bottle."

The money it cost George went for lawyers' fees, restitution on bad debts, three stays in an alcohol treatment center and psychotherapy. "I went to AA after the second time I stopped; but I still didn't stop drinking. I got so bad that I had an alcoholic seizure in a theatre once and ended up in the hospital. I remember the doctor saying, "Just another drunk." But it was over a month after that that I finally stopped drinking."

"Now I really enjoy getting together with friends and family at Christmas," George says. "I am not alone any more. I try to go to



I used to know every bar that is open on Thanksgiving and Christmas, and there aren't many in Seattle. Even now I get upset when I spend a holiday up there.

AA meetings every day. I take care of myself. My life isn't extreme any more. I live within my means. I live one day at a time."

"When I was drinking I thought being suicidal was normal. And I was ill quite a lot, but I never knew what was wrong. Doctors never diagnosed my problem as alcoholism," George says. "I think a lot can be done to help in the diagnosis of alcoholism. The medical profession needs to go a long way to do something about it."

"I changed my lifestyle," George continues.

"If I kept the values that I had when I stopped I would go back to drinking. I had found it easier to live a double standard and drink, but now I live in the present. Living in the present and not drinking means that things are black and white; I used to live in the past and future, now I live in the present."

The stories of George and Martha are not atypical. They both had to deal with a double standard and masked their pain with alcohol.

And double standards is what brings us back to the beginning. "Is Christmas really

the time when all wishes come true?"

(Editor's note: Phoenix Rising is having a workshop on *Holiday Blues*, on December 11. Bob DeWalt and Liz Webb will facilitate. Call 223-8299 for further information. Also, the Live and Let Live Club, 2707 SE Belmont, is the place where Gay AA groups meet. Phone numbers are 231-3760, 231-1467, 234-4664. Meetings are 5:30 p.m. Monday-Friday; 8:00 p.m. Sunday-Friday; and lunch meeting every day at noon.)