

A story of hope and healing

Tribe's drug and alcohol counselor wrote a book detailing his addiction and recovery

By Danielle Frost

Smoke Signals staff writer

Joe Martineau endured a childhood few could imagine. Taken from his Reservation as a young boy in the early 1960s, he lived in more than a dozen foster homes before he was a teen. There, Martineau's "Indian" identity was mentally and physically battered. He suffered sadistic beatings, hard labor and total isolation as punishment.

"I truly thought I could never heal from lifelong scars which I could feel all the way to my core," Martineau says. "I attempted suicide shortly after I became a teenager."

He credits the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, and a caring foster father, with saving his life. His last foster home as a high school student was with a Native American family, where he was reintroduced to his Native culture and customs.

However, addictions to drugs and alcohol grew to a point where Martineau was homeless and roaming the streets at 15. In his mind, blackouts were the only form of escape from the horrific abuse he endured in earlier foster homes.

"I would always be drinking, fighting and running away," Martineau says. "No one could get me to stop. I never thought that I was worth it. But the people on the streets used to tell me, 'You don't belong here with us.' And I would say, 'Yes I do.' I believed that."

Today, Martineau, 57, is the



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Joe Martineau is the Tribe's drug and alcohol counselor, who himself recently celebrated 27 years of sobriety. He has a sweat lodge at his home in Amity and he uses sweats as part of his continued spiritual journey. Here, he's seen by one of the Tribe's sweat lodges.

**"Awan" by
Joe Martineau
is available at
www.amazon.com**

Tribe's alcohol and drug counselor, and recently celebrated 27 years of sobriety. He credits his then 7-year-old daughter for inspiring the decision to quit drinking.

"She came up to me and said, 'Dad, you're going to die if don't stop drinking. Please don't drink

anymore,'" he says. "That hit me in a deep part of my soul. She was worth it."

His daughter, now 35, was also the motivation behind Martineau's self-published autobiography, "Awan," which tells the story of his journey. Awan means fog in the Ojibwe language. Martineau is from the Ojibwe Tribe and Fond du Lac band in Minnesota, and also identifies as Anishinabe, which includes the Odawa, Ojibwe, Potawatomi, Oji-Cree, Mississaugas, Chippewa and Algonquin peoples.

"She told me, 'Wow, Dad! Detox to director! Now that's a story.'"

Martineau recounts in the opening chapter how he was "mildly annoyed" by the statement, but it was also "amazingly true."

"I went from foster homes to drinking wine, rubbing alcohol, after shave and whatever else would take me to the blackouts I needed ... as an escape from the life I was tired of."

He wrote that finding sobriety was a foundation to seek what he was really craving, which was spiritual recovery.

"A comment I always made was that I wasn't very good at drinking, but I absolutely sucked at life," Martineau says. "Today, my past prior to recovery seems like a dream ... a very bad dream."

His relationships fared no better. Martineau would become extremely jealous and controlling to the point that his partners would eventually tire of it and leave.

"I was searching for love, but never having it myself, I demanded it from women, but in my mind, they were never able to prove it," he says. "Men who go through that tend to justify their behavior ... but I always knew it was wrong. I just didn't know how to stop."

After several rocky relationships that defined his earlier life, Martineau has now been married for seven years to wife, Alice. Together, they have eight grandchildren. The couple lives in Amity and has a sweat lodge at their home, which is part of Martineau's continued spiritual

journey.

"The hardest part (of the past) was crying for and craving a spiritual connection," he says. "I see it a lot with my clients. There is so much spiritual confusion. ... They feel that what they are doing by drinking and using drugs is wrong, so they cannot be a part of anything sacred. Kids will ask me at the lodge, 'What do we have to believe in?' I tell them God loves us the way our grandparents do ... enough to teach us a better way and to give us knowledge."

Martineau says being an author was something he never considered. His goal was simple: Share his story of healing with his two daughters. That evolved into sharing it with others and eventually a book.

"Coming from the past I had lived, there was such an incredible amount of baggage," he says. "It took seven tries at in-patient facilities and just as many out-patient to get where I am today. I had to stop blaming the foster care system and start taking responsibility for my drinking. I always had these dreams of spirituality and little by little, I was able to accept it."

One defining moment came when Martineau and his now ex-wife saw the foster mom who had severely abused him as a child.

"She was this little, frail, stooped-over woman," he says. "But seeing her gave me an anxiety attack from the memories of that whip."

However, Martineau gathered his courage, walked up to the woman and said, "Mom, I forgive you," and then walked away.

"It's possible to get past even that," he says.

Martineau's 11 siblings have all struggled with substance abuse. One of his sisters has been in treatment more than 30 times.

"She is very addicted," he says. "There are some things she just can't get rid of."

However, Martineau's mother was a big inspiration once he decided to permanently "plug the bottle."

"My mom had 42 years of sobriety when she died in 2013," he says. "She continued to drink well after she lost us to foster care, but then once woke up in a mental hospital with a guy banging his head into a wall, and said that was enough. She was done."

Despite a horrific childhood and severe alcohol abuse, Martineau now has peace, saying that it was all a part of "the creator's plan."

"Most people that lived like I did are either dead now, have permanent brain damage or are in prison," he says. "I have lost so many relatives from early death. That was the path I was on."

Above Martineau's desk, high up where he can see it as he walks into the office every day, is a motivational sign that also serves as a reminder:

"Whether you have one day or one thousand days, you are an inspiration. You have one day that someone else hasn't reached." ■

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