

The Comeback Kid

How one client found the inner strength to forge a new future for himself

Meeting me in the room where he began his treatment at Portage Path Behavioral Health, Terry K. takes a moment to look around, a big smile spreading over his face. "It's like I've come full circle now, meeting in my intake therapist's office like this."

A big man with a shaved head and trimmed goatee, Terry has an edgy look about him, but as soon as he speaks, it's obvious that this is a warm, caring, and highly intelligent person who has worked hard to turn his life around.

Once a promising artist in every medium, a student in the top ten percent of his high school class, a member of the National Honor Society and the Chess Club, Terry has lived a difficult life in his 41 years, battling his way back from addiction, incarceration, and alienation.

A quiet, creative child, Terry was named "Most Artistic" in school, and achieved very high grades, but says he still felt like an outcast. Home wasn't much of a retreat for him either. His family was both physically and emotionally abusive, and he was constantly at odds with his father, who wasn't exactly supportive of his academic and artistic endeavors. Making matters worse, his mother suffered from MS.

Terry's refuge became the local bowling alley, where in between frames he discovered drugs and alcohol with other local miscreants. His art was forgotten. Ironically, a drug store now stands in place of the old bowling alley where Terry admits to "drinkin' and druggin'" away 20 years of his life and he's quick to point out that even though the sign said "bowling alley", it always operated as a "drug store" for him.

His first attempt at any kind of treatment came in his late teens, after he blew all his college money on drugs. Originally sent to his mother's therapist, he didn't buy into the treatment and quit going completely. This only added to the widening gulf between his parents and himself.

Without support from his family, Terry missed an opportunity to attend an art school, but was able to go to the University of Akron on a scholarship. Unfortunately, he spent his days smoking marijuana and playing cards in the student center until he eventually flunked out of college.

After a physical altercation with his father, Terry moved out, but

found that working at the bowling alley for soda, beer and joints wouldn't be enough to support himself, and he found a factory job working with metal and welding. Metal work was something Terry enjoyed, and he stayed with the job for a long time. He even discovered a friend and mentor in his boss, Paul.

Unfortunately, Paul's influence wasn't enough to keep Terry away from the bowling alley, getting high and scoring free drinks from his buddies. Looking back, he realizes that the drugs and alcohol were a way to "self medicate" because he didn't know how to deal with the underlying emotions that were his real burden.

Sensing a void in his life, Terry believed that finding the right woman would help inspire him to clean up his act and serve as a muse for a forgotten love of art; however, Terry ended up marrying a confused woman, just as emotionally unstable as himself, and the couple soon had a daughter.

Despite not receiving treatment for what he now knows is major recurrent depression, Terry's spirits had lifted. He was on a land contract to purchase a house, he had a wife, a decent job, and a beautiful little girl. For the first time in many years, Terry felt that all was right with the world.

"I didn't need the drugs and alcohol anymore," remarks Terry. "I had no desire. I didn't need those things to make me happy because my wife and daughter made me happy." His creativity came back also, and he put lots of work into fixing up their home. He was most proud of the nursery, his labor of love - a fantasy baby room.

Happiness would be short-lived. Six months later, Terry's new bride had an affair and he threw her out. An extremely tense and difficult divorce followed, but Terry was still determined to spend as much time with his little girl as he could.

"I was Super Dad on my weekends with her," Terry says proudly, "It killed me when I had to return her to her mother's house. She'd cry and cling to me and that just breaks a father's heart."

If Terry was a candidate for Father of the Year when his daughter was visiting, time without her was another story altogether. Memories from those times are

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cloudy...filled with the stench of liquor and the haze of drugs. His elation during his visits with her were replaced with increasing anger and despair every time he had to leave her. "I lost my soul when I didn't see her," he says, not ashamed to hide the tears the memories bring.

In time, his ex moved several hours away and Terry didn't always have a license or a car to go and visit his daughter. When he was able to see her, he faced conflicts with work that only served to remind him of a poor relationship with his own parents.

"My time with my daughter would only overlap with work for a few hours. But my parents wouldn't watch her then because their weekends were 'too precious'. Too precious to spend with their only grandchild - can you believe that," explains Terry, still clearly shocked and bitter about their attitude. "It was like beating my head against the wall. When they couldn't be there for their granddaughter, that was really the end of our relationship for me."

Terry's substance abuse and absenteeism was his eventual downfall. "I never blamed Paul for firing me. He did what he had to do," Terry says. "I didn't care about losing the job, but I felt bad for letting him down. He gave me every chance to clean up my act. He's a hell of a guy."

Things quickly began a downward spiral for Terry. Although he was working odd jobs, he increased his chemical dependence, received multiple DUI's and often drove on a suspended license. His emotions had darkened and became unbearable.

The love of art he knew was again forgotten, but his creativity shined through in one distinct way - the flamboyant ideas he had about suicide, each one more disturbing than the last. One of the most memorable plans was to go out on a bridge, douse himself in gasoline, drink antifreeze, set himself on fire, jump, and shoot himself on the way down.

"At night," he clarifies. "So that everyone could see me go down in flames. Pretty messed up, huh?"

One thought prevented him from following through. "My daughter is my little angel. I thought of her and realized that I didn't want to embarrass her by committing suicide. My daughter rescued me, she just doesn't know it."

Close friends Christine and Todd were the only people Terry had left to turn to. He'd call them when he was high on drugs and drunk, when he felt "messed up and lonely." They often encouraged him to seek some kind of treatment, especially after they witnessed him experimenting with methamphetamines.

Terry finally made an appointment with a doctor, but not for his

behavioral issues. The night prior to his appointment, he went on a six hour drinking binge, forcing Christine to drive him to his appointment the next morning.

He saw the doctor for what he believed might be cancer. "I had this growth...it had grown over years and years," he utters. "I didn't tell anyone because I hoped it would kill me."

When he found out that he was mistaken and that it wasn't cancer, he was actually *disappointed* - cancer would have been his ticket out of life and he wouldn't have had to embarrass his daughter by committing suicide.

Despite his raging hangover, or perhaps *because* of it, Terry decided to tell the doctor everything - including his suicidal thoughts and substance abuse. Terry's doctor immediately recognized the signs of depression and provided him with medication and a referrals to psychiatrists.

"That day, my want, will, taste, anything that ever drove me to drink and drug was gone," he exclaims. He attributes the quick turnaround in part to the medication, but mostly because he finally knew what was wrong with him - chronic depression - and he could do something about it.

Despite an eagerness and willingness to begin dealing with his disorder, treatment had to wait. Terry had jail time pending for a DUI charge.

"I think I was the only guy in there who didn't want to drink or do drugs anymore," he adamantly states. "I was happy again, I knew what was wrong with me and I knew what to do about it."

He did what he was told and really "bought into" his weekly therapy while incarcerated. "I didn't just play the game like the other guys. I was going to make the most of any treatment I could get. I didn't lie at my intake appointment. I was honest with them and myself."

The positive energy gave him back his art. He designed a comic book and sent a series of illustrated postcards about a cute crab at "The Oriana State Park" to Todd and Christine's little girls. He was even inspired to paint a mural on their wall and planned exactly how it would look. "Christine always tells me that the postcards and the mural are such neat memories for the girls," he remembers.

Despite the happiness and creativity he experienced in jail, Terry's situation was about to get worse before it got better. "As soon as I got out of jail, I became even more depressed than I was before I went in, as I realized how bad my financial situation was."

It was then that Terry remembered Portage Path Behavioral

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Health. "My doctor had suggested Portage Path to me. I was hesitant to go though, I was nervous and skeptical," he says. "I wasn't sure anyone could help me. You don't know what its like to want to die every moment of the day. I needed help."

Terry met with Therese Vipperman, a therapist at Portage Path. "I was a heapin' mess. I begged her to fix me, and looked at her with these big puppy dog eyes, full of sorrow, but she told me it wasn't her job to fix me, but to help me fix myself," he remembers. "Then she told me about ITS."

Intensive Treatment Services (ITS) is a partial hospitalization program at Portage Path that runs for 13 weeks and is designed to help clients make progress quickly. The program helps develop self-reliance, problem-solving skills and hopefulness for the future.

"I only had to go a certain number of days," Terry says. "But I liked it so much I wanted to go every day. The first day was crafts, and that was really cool. I absolutely loved it." Each day of the program, there is a different focus. Some days clients focused on learning how to monitor and understand their medication. Another day of the week focuses on family and relationships.

The part of ITS that most clients remember as being most helpful though, is Coping Skills, and Terry was no exception. "Boy, that was the one I really needed," he says. "I went religiously. I liked being there. Socially, I was kept busy and I learned really great skills that I know will stay with me forever."

Terry knew that he had to follow strict rules to make the most out of the program. He didn't make friends with group members outside of treatment, he didn't use alcohol or drugs and he practiced the skills he learned.

"I wanted to turn myself over to the therapists and put myself in Portage Path's hands. The way I was doing things hadn't worked for me, and the therapists knew what was going on. I put my faith in [Portage Path], I didn't bend the rules."

Terry considered himself a work in progress ... sober, but with a long way to go. Vipperman assured him that he'd come so far already and that he had much to be proud of.

His next order of business was making amends for the things he regretted most. Terry had cut many people out of his life, and for some, it was too late. He's still trying to mend his relationship with his sister. "She never did anything wrong," he admits.

A fortuitous twist of fate also brought Paul, his old boss and mentor back into his life.

"The very first thing I did was apologize for skipping out on him. I told him I'd always respected him for what he did for me. I didn't know I needed help then, but I told him I was healthy now, and working on staying that way. The next thing I know, I'm working for him again! Just like that, back at my old table!"

Terry even started his own art business in addition to working for Paul. Especially Art! studios specializes in metal sculptures, murals, greeting cards, paintings and all forms of commissioned artwork.

His artistic talents filtered into other areas as well. To help others who suffer from behavioral illnesses, Terry began teaching an art class at Choices, a community social center for those currently in treatment.

Terry is so committed to giving back to the mental health system that he made appearances at Summit County's Celebration Recovery, a county-wide event to honor those recovering from mental illness, the professionals that helped them achieve their goals, and to raise awareness in the community. Terry was a speaker at the event and of course, shared his art through face painting.

Terry's newfound success didn't stop there. This past year, he performed at First Night Akron as a caricature artist. He's sold several pieces of art, including some metal sculptures and is looking forward to racing in a full season of stock car driving ... something his finances and alcoholism never allowed before.

Terry's daughter is 16 years old now, and he fully intends on sharing his stock car season with her. Proud father that he is, he gushes, "She really took it upon herself to turn her grades around. She's got a job and she's getting A's! I told her for every good grade card, I'll get her a piece of her own stock car uniform."

How close is she to that goal? "She'll end up with a helmet and be driving my car by the end of the season!" he exclaims, confident in her academic abilities.

"I never want to go back to the way I felt before. It means so much to me that Portage Path helped me get my life back. I want to tell others that change is scary, but sometimes you have to change yourself and your surroundings to get better. You have to have faith and trust people."

The future holds a great deal of promise for Terry. He's thrilled to have his art, his health, and his job back. "It feels like I fell of a cliff and I'm working my way back up. I'm going to really enjoy that journey."

Terry's recently reached a personal milestone, marking one full year of sobriety. He has plans to jump out of an airplane - with a parachute, of course - to celebrate.



Terry in the Winner's Circle at Barberton Raceway