

The Final Search for Sobriety

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On July 20, 2012, Charles Weems will begin his new life... for the third time. Retiring his white kitchen chef uniform for the afternoon, he will saunter through the community center in a silky black cap and gown with that characteristic grin covering his face, failing miserably to restrain his enthusiasm. After two years of extensive treatment for his alcoholism, Charles will graduate from the Triangle Residential Options for Substance Abusers recovery program with a new state of sobriety, promising future and new life perspective.

This transformation did not come easily for Charles or any other resident currently working through TROSA's recovery program. Beginning with a peer group of 47 people, Charles works to complete the final three months of his treatment with only 11 of them remaining by his side. "It's one of those things where some of the people you think are going to stay don't, and some of the guys you think won't make it end up staying," Charles said. Despite their shrinking numbers, Charles' peer group provided a critical sense of support for him as he shared his life story and learned that he was not alone in his desperation for dramatic change.

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Growing up in Birmingham, Ala., with his adoptive parents, Charles moved a good bit due to the nature of his father's trucking job. "The longest time I ever lived

in a single city was four years,” Charles said. While the constant relocation transformed Charles’ younger adopted brother into an antisocial child, he embraced change and enjoyed making new friends everywhere he moved. His sociable and hyperactive nature, common words of his parents, contributed to his involvement in sports and clubs, as well as his poor academic record throughout high school.

Charles’ childhood memories consistently evoke images of alcohol, for both of his parents suffered from alcoholism. As neighborhood hosts, they threw countless parties and made sure no one’s hands were ever empty. Charles first experienced alcohol with his cousin, Buddy, at a Christmas Eve party when he was only 13 years old. Together, the boys chugged a Tupperware container full of clear liquid they assumed to be vodka in the backyard. With the empty bowl in hand, the boys staggered drunkenly into the kitchen and devoured the remaining three quarters of a chocolate cake sitting on the counter. Feeling overwhelmingly nauseous from their first-time vodka binge and overindulgence of their sweet tooth, Charles and Buddy wandered confused into his aunt’s bedroom. Buddy proceeded to vomit the night’s activities all over his mother and her bedspread as he tried to explain how he wasn’t feeling well.

Unfortunately, Charles was not only exposed to his parent’s drinking habits at holiday gatherings. He recalled several instances in his childhood when his father did not return home at night for dinner as expected, so his mother packed him and his brother into their car and drove them to a nearby restaurant. It did not take him long to recognize his father sitting at the same restaurant bar with his arm around another woman. His mother sat the two boys down at a table and said, “I want you

to look at your father. There he sits with another woman. Don't ever do this to the woman that you love and that you marry. This is not how you treat your wife."

Without skipping a beat, she stood up from their table and strode over to the bar where her husband sat. Without speaking, he stood slowly and joined his family for dinner at that table, not even daring to say goodbye to his new bar friend. This scene went unnoticed by all restaurant personnel and diners, but it burned into the back of Charles' mind permanently.

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Venturing several miles from TROSA's main campus, I arrived at an old, renovated elementary school donated by the city and transformed into the T-North dormitory where I met with Charles for the second time. As I followed his supervisor, Willie Lane, through the dimly lit corridors and stairwells, a wave of anxiety rushed through my body. Unfamiliar rooms filled with faces of men in their earliest stages of recovery left me trailing closely behind Willie like a young child shyly hiding behind the bends of her mother's knees.

These nerves instantly disappeared as we rounded the corner, our steps in sync, into the dormitory kitchen where Charles worked as the head chef and caterer. With a beckoning bark from Willie, Charles appeared in the open kitchen window within seconds, beaming and waving energetically as if he was greeting an old friend. A heavysset, clean-shaven, middle-aged man, Charles stood tall in his neatly ironed chef uniform that remained perfectly white throughout the first nine hours of his workday. Peering through a pair of eyeglasses void of any fingerprints, smudges or specks of dust, he surveyed the current activity of his kitchen staff. He simply

seemed out of place, belonging in the backdrop of a five-star restaurant as opposed to a kitchen operated by recovering drug addicts providing meals to recovering drug addicts.

Welcoming me through the old swinging doors, Charles introduced me to all of his kitchen family members as they began preparing dinner for all of the dormitory residents. The menu for the evening offered pepper steak and rice, incorporating all recently donated ingredients from generous TROSA supporters across the country. Charles supervised Kevin, his protégé of the last three months, as he prepared the main entrée's ingredients in a 50-gallon tilt skillet: 120 pounds of high-quality beef, a half case of green bell peppers, a half case of yellow onions and the complementary spices bring Charles' recipe to life. "The guys eat well," Charles said. "I know I've gained 20 pounds since I got here," patting his protruding belly under the guise of his chef uniform.

Embodying TROSA's "each one, teach one" motto, Charles taught Kevin the majority of his recently acquired culinary skills, from sautéing meat and vegetables simultaneously to the proper methods of tasting the food before serving it. A former professional chef in the hotel industry, Charles contributed a special level of expertise and professionalism to this crew. "I try to instill in these guys processes that they can take from here and go straight into a hotel or restaurant and make a little more money than just rocking it as a dishwasher," Charles said. "That way, they have the ability to go on and make more money to support themselves."

On a less serious note, Charles maintains a contagious sense of humor to help entertain the boys throughout their workdays. "I can still beat you on eggs," he

challenged Kevin with a hearty laugh as he strutted out of the kitchen and into the dining area with me following closely behind. Egg cracking contests are among their favorite games. On Sundays, they go through six or seven cases of eggs, cracking them all by hand and racing to see who can break his case first.

Officially replacing Charles as the head chef of the T-North dormitory kitchen, Kevin is now responsible for preparing 100,000 meals for approximately 380 program residents each week with his staff. Having completed his 21st month of treatment the day I visited with him, Charles now has 90 days to find full-time employment outside the TROSA campus. "I have enjoyed being here at TROSA, but now it's time for me to go out and create my own life past TROSA," Charles said. The program staff will hold the money he accrues during this time period as they continue to provide his lodging, meals, medical treatment and transportation. Charles will reclaim this money upon completion of his 24th month, helping him begin his independent life with a sense of financial stability. "Thanks to TROSA, I will leave here at 24 months with a job, a home full of furniture, a driver's license and money in the bank," Charles said.

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Despite his successful recovery throughout the past 21 months, Charles appears apprehensive about leaving TROSA in 90 days. "I want to make sure I haven't missed anything, that I have everything I need to stay sober leaving here," Charles said. TROSA thoroughly prepared him for independent, sober life through intensive counseling, classes and work experience, but all residents know that the program really starts when they go out into the real world and start working. For

Charles and the majority of other residents, TROSA marks their second time undergoing treatment for their addictions.

In the mid-90s, Charles attended a 9-month, Christian-based treatment program in Titusville, Fla., to address his alcoholism and remained sober for the following nine years. Unfortunately, almost one year to the date that his first marriage ended in divorce, he began to drink again. He thought he could have just one beer, but one beer ultimately spiraled into a life of homelessness and loneliness. “It got to the point where if I didn’t have a drink in the morning, I got the shakes, I couldn’t go to work, I couldn’t even sign my own name,” Charles said. Consuming a half-gallon of liquor per day, he drank to live and lived to drink, losing sight of the value and purpose of his life.

After losing his most recent job as an executive chef at the Sheraton Hotel in Chapel Hill, N.C., Charles met a homeless Vietnam veteran who lived in the woods lining Highway 15-501. Taking Charles into his makeshift home, the veteran helped him attain his begging tag from downtown Durham, and the two took the streets together. One morning as Charles begged for money at the Interstate 40/ Highway 15-501 interchange, a familiar yellow corvette pulled up alongside him. The general manager of the Sheraton Hotel rolled down his window to get a good look at the man who was once his executive chef. “After throwing me a \$20 bill, he said, ‘You need to get some help. I don’t want to see you on this corner again,’” Charles said.

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Charles thinks differently about his alcoholism now. Approaching 50 years old, he has lost literally everything of value twice in his life besides his own

heartbeat. "I should have a big fat retirement fund, a beautiful house that's practically paid for, a couple kids, a wife, a picket fence and the whole deal, and here I am starting fresh all over again," Charles said. However, he is far from bitter about his loss. Instead, he focuses on his new positive momentum to make good decisions and minimize the stresses that trigger his old habits. Should he ever pick up a drink again, the ticking of his self-destruction time bomb would begin tormenting him yet again.

Recognizing that any resurfacing of his drinking would leave him destitute, homeless and suicidal, Charles knew he reached the point of no return the day he arrived at TROSA. His first year simply allowed him to piece his brain back together, learning to think without speaking and think before acting. The grass glowed greener, the trees grew livelier, and he felt a sincere happiness each morning as he woke and didn't crave another drink. "TROSA gave me the time and the concern and the ability to get sober and find out how it really feels to not worry about drinking anymore," Charles said. "I've been here long enough to change my behaviors and begin enjoying being sober."

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After completing 18 months of his 2-year program, Charles earned the privilege of dating outside of the TROSA campus and reunited with his former girlfriend. He met Lisa, also a recovering alcoholic, at Durham Technical Community College when he was taking informational technology courses. "After my divorce, I thought I would never meet a woman that I would want to marry again," Charles

said. "But I knew in my heart that we were meant to be together the moment Lisa smiled at me."

After witnessing Charles' drinking seizures, detoxifications, and struggles with unemployment as a result of his alcoholism, Lisa began her own journey to sobriety when he enrolled at TROSA. They agreed to reach out to one another after Charles completed 18 months of his program, and they have dated two nights each week since late January. "It's been good that we have been able to take it one step at a time and spend time together, and think about where we're going and where we've been," Charles said.

Through their sobriety pact, the couple holds one another accountable for remembering their troubled past and working toward a brighter future. "Our relationship is now better than ever since the day we met," Charles said. He vows that it was her tough love that truly saved his life. "It cost me a lot of heartache, but look where we are today," Charles said. The couple is currently in the process of renovating their new home, which they plan to move into together once Charles completes his program.

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Charles' father served as his driving influence to achieve sobriety when he enrolled in his first treatment program. After his relapse, however, he lost connection with his father. Angered and disappointed by his son's failure, Charles' father simply wanted nothing to do with him. The two spoke only three times over a span of four years as alcohol continued to wreak havoc on Charles' life.

“The last time I spoke with my father was in January before I enrolled at TROSA,” Charles said. After his father refused to help him seek treatment a second time, Charles began recovering at TROSA with the intention of reaching out to him after achieving a year of sobriety to prove his dedication. “Sadly, my father died July 10, six months after I started the program last year,” Charles said. He passed without knowing that Charles was receiving the help that would ultimately kick start his future success and that what he wanted most was to share this life-changing accomplishment with him.

Despite his inability to connect with his father, Charles reached out to his mother after completing his first 12 months of the program, and the two have communicated consistently ever since. He also receives frequent letters from aunts and uncles, expressing their support of his dedication to achieve permanent sobriety and independence. Despite the fact that his 85-year-old mother resides in an assisted living home and is incapable of traveling alone, Charles hopes she will attend his graduation in July. Lisa offered to transport her to and from the event, the perfect graduation gift for the man she loves.

Charles plans on giving Lisa his own surprise token of appreciation the day of his graduation. “What she doesn’t know is that I am going to ask her to marry me after I receive my diploma,” Charles said with a hushed voice. Clearly, TROSA provided him with the life tools and skills necessary to recover from much more than his alcoholism, initiating a fresh start that will hopefully be his last.