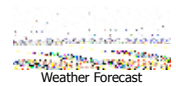




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### THE STREETS OF SANTA BARBARA : SB Rescue Mission offers recovery, hope to man lost to alcohol

MICHAL ELSETH, NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

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Homelessness has many causes, but one of the greatest sources of chronic homelessness is addiction to drugs or alcohol. Those addictions become an obsession that can leave a life in shambles, as Robert Raseta knows well.

Mr. Raseta's lifelong addiction to alcohol began at age 13, and when the now-48 year old Santa Barbara resident finishes the Santa Barbara Rescue Mission's recovery program this July, it will be the first time he has lived sober since childhood.

He grew up in Lowellville, Ohio, in an unhappy home. His parents divorced as soon as his father returned from Vietnam. His father, who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, was a violent alcoholic, and Mr. Raseta was often the object of his father's abuse.

"It was tough growing up," he said. "He ruled with an iron fist."

Surrounded by high school dreams of prom and athletic stardom, Robert instead began working at a young age. He began drinking and smoking at age 13, and said his father would even sit and drink with him.

Mr. Raseta joined the military as early as possible, just to escape from home. He was sent overseas, where he was swept up in an atmosphere of alcohol, drugs, and prostitutes.

"I was just a hick who knows nothing of the real world -- it was kind of a Pandora's box," he said.

When he came home in 1983, the steel mills near Lowellville had closed down and the United Auto Workers were on strike. Mr. Raseta gathered his belongings and took off.

Beginning in Florida, he made his way west, taking odd manual labor jobs. A friend told him there were jobs in Santa Barbara, so in 1984 he ended up here.

"It's a place everybody dreams of living," he said. "And of course the alcohol flows all over this city. It was perfect for my addiction."

While he worked construction during the day, at night he joined the party scene, where his addiction intensified. His drinking led to numerous arrests and landed him in jail several times.

During that time Mr. Raseta fell in love with a woman named Mary, with whom he had a daughter named Chelsea. But his addiction drove his life, and after a series of arrests, he lost custody of Chelsea.

The loss broke Mr. Raseta's heart.

"I wish she would understand why I wasn't there -- it's not that I didn't love her, but my addiction had me wrapped around its finger," he said. "It's a cunning, baffling and powerful thing."

In between jail time, he continued to bounce around jobs, but often lived on the streets. In between apartments he would sleep in Pershing Park or wherever he fell asleep.

"I would share a ditch with a possum," he said.

In 2003 he married a woman named Christina. They had only been married six months when he went to prison, where he stayed until 2007.

He was out for two years, and worked for Dave's Auto Glass, which he enjoyed. But everyone in his life, including his boss, told him he had to get help. Still he persisted.

"I wanted to drink," he said. "I wanted nothing of God."

In July, 2009, he was charged with cocaine possession. In addition to serving time, he took an alternative sentence, trying a rehabilitation program for a short time. But when he found out Mary, the mother of his daughter, had died, he drank as hard as ever.

One day, as he complained about his circumstances, a friend told him, "Robert, go look in the mirror and you will see



Robert Raseta in front of the Santa Barbara Rescue Mission, where he is recovering from a lifelong alcohol addiction.  
 THOMAS KELSEY/NEWS-PRESS

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what your problem is." At the time he was unwilling to admit that, but it made a lasting impression.

In February, 2010, picking up Super Bowl winnings from a bar, Mr. Raseta met a police officer who knew the terms of his parole, which included not drinking, and smelled alcohol on his breath. Once again he was sent to Santa Barbara County Jail.

Finally, he realized his life was unmanageable and he was a defeated man. Once he could concede that, he said, he was ready to begin a new life. It was the turning point in Mr. Raseta's life.

He was given a Bible by the chaplain, and wrote a letter to the Santa Barbara Rescue Mission. The first time, he was denied. But he persisted, and warily, they accepted him into their program.

"They did not even expect me to last three days," he said.

But he was finally determined to conquer his addiction, and he went straight from custody to the Rescue Mission.

"I never, ever thought I would end up here," he said. "It's been the most difficult thing I've ever had to do, but it's probably been the most beneficial thing I've ever done."

In fighting his addiction, Mr. Raseta said, he had to be willing to change completely.

That change, he said, came through knowing God. He quotes a favorite Bible verse: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come."

He is now halfway through the Rescue Mission's state-certified rehabilitation program, and his new desire is to help others struggling with alcohol addiction. His mentor at the Rescue Mission has been an encouragement in overcoming addiction and is now helping him plan for his new life.

He hopes to return to work at Dave's Auto Glass, and mend his relationship with his daughter Chelsea. He also will continue to serve in his church, finding new purpose in helping others. He has a job as a clerk at the Rescue Mission as well, making appointments for other men in the program.

"All service is, is love dressed up in work clothes," he said.

That love has driven him to use what he has learned to help others who are where he was six months ago.

"We break that through a power greater than ourselves," he said, "and I found that in Christ."

e-mail: melseth@newspress.com

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