

### Who do you think binge drinks?

Young people? Alcoholics? You would be right, but there is more to it than that. Did you know binge drinking increases with household income? It is prevalent in:

- 12% of households with annual income under \$25,000.
- 15% of households between \$25-50,000.
- 17% of households between \$50-75,000.
- 19% households over \$75,000.<sup>1</sup>

1. <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/pdf/2010-10-vital-signs.pdf>

Dear Readers,

We thank you for your great support during the last quarter of 2020. Despite the challenges of COVID-19, you stepped up and offered your gifts which enable us to keep publishing the RECAP.

We continue to explore funding opportunities to advance this important work, while protecting and growing our modest endowment. We welcome both your suggestions and your continued support in making that possible in 2021 and beyond.

You can help by making a recurring gift or by including the MICAP endowment fund in your estate plan. To learn more about how you can support MICAP, email us at [info@micap.org](mailto:info@micap.org)

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## Luke's Story

As told to MICAP Board member Vernon K. Smith, Luke's Uncle

Luke, my nephew, is one of 15 million Americans with "Alcohol Use Disorder" (AUD.)

Since high school, alcohol has been part of Luke's life. For more than a decade, he's had AUD. Medically, that means he has a drinking problem so severe that he has "an impaired ability to control or stop alcohol use despite adverse social, occupational, or health consequences."

I've known and loved Luke since he was born. He grew up in a loving home, was a good student, went to the University of Kansas and got a degree in economics. He's very smart. He easily became a member of Mensa.

Luke is now 36, homeless, unemployed, and still struggling. The place he calls "home" is a college town in another state.

I saw Luke recently at a family funeral. He'd been sober for two weeks and he looked good. He and I share degrees in economics, and I've always enjoyed talking with him. I asked if he'd be willing to talk about alcoholism and his life. He agreed, hoping it might help someone going through what he is going through.

Luke is his real name; he said we should use his real name. I turned on my recorder, and he shared his journey with alcohol. I was impressed with how open, self-aware and articulate he was as he described how alcohol became the theme of his life, so far.

Here is Luke's story, in his own words. It is edited only lightly for readability:

**When did you begin drinking?** *In high school, I drank socially, maybe every weekend, maybe every other weekend, at parties and such. In college, I don't feel like I drank that much. I mean, I went out on my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, but I would only allow myself to drink like once a week. When I was 22 was when I really started drinking on a daily basis. My roommate had knee surgery, so he couldn't leave, walk or drive. That's when it really became part of my daily routine.*

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I got out of college. I got a job. For the next 3½ years, I'd tell myself, I need to get certain things done, and then I'd allow myself to drink. I'd get done with work, work out, pay my bills, get everything done, and then I'd drink. So, I drank every night for those 3½ years. On weekends, I'd drink during the day while I was hanging out with my friends. At the time, I felt like I was still functioning while I was drinking.

Then when I was 25, I decided to go out to LA. I had money, and I had nothing to do. That's when it was like, well, I might as well just drink all day, and I did that. I had no motivation. You lose interest in other things, and it kind of becomes your focal point. That's your purpose. That's all you want to do. That was about six, seven months before I first went to detox.

The first thing they tell you in AA, when you are trying to get sober, is to get right with yourself, to figure yourself out. For me, being drunk all the time, I didn't really have a good relationship with myself. There is a lot of self-loathing. That's why I continued to drink, so I could suppress all those feelings, to mask them.

**You stopped drinking sometimes?** Since I was 25, for the past 11 years, it's been back and forth. I'll go on sobriety binges, like I'll be sober for months at a time. And, then I'll get tired of that, and I'll want to get drunk, and I'll go on a drinking binge until I get tired of that, which is usually when I go to the hospital, or to jail. Usually, it's one of those two things. Or, if something comes up, like with this funeral, I have to be sober so I can come here and be around family and be part of this.

When I'm sober, I like to try to take advantage of it, and read some literature, and grow spiritually as much as I can, to take advantage of the opportunities.

I really want to be sober. When I start drinking, I don't want to stop, but when I stop drinking, I don't want to start. It's one of those weird dichotomies. It's not easy. It's tough. It's a challenge.

**What about your health?** Now, I'm getting older, and I'm thinking about health issues. I'm not 27 or 28 anymore. I'm 36. I'm feeling like I really can't

be doing this anymore. Now, when I stop drinking, usually I have to go to the hospital, because I get seizures. Like the seizures I had last Friday. The last time I went to the hospital, my liver and kidneys were still pretty intact, but it is a concern.

**What about being homeless?** It is difficult to be homeless and not drink. It is just what everyone does. It is really hard. It's hard to have a network of people that I can be around that are sober, and that I can relate to, with similar interests, more so than just on the basis of alcoholism.

Especially, when you don't have an address, it is hard to get a job. I don't have an address to put down, I don't have a cell phone to get a hold of anyone. So, you just kind of give up, and you just go get something to drink and forget about it and worry about tomorrow when tomorrow comes. That's usually what happens.

**What happens when you get a job?** When I have a job and a little money, a place to live, that is my comfort zone. Any time I get past that, I'm uncomfortable. For me, I'd rather be miserable than uncomfortable. I can find comfort in my misery. But being uncomfortable is just something I can't handle. It's scary being in a place you don't know. I need to get back to a place I know. And I know that if I start drinking, all that stuff will go away. And I will go back to the bottom. If I drink, even if I'm homeless, I know what is going to happen from day to day. That is a lot of what draws me back to it.

I like to look for a challenge, and sometimes the only challenge I have is to try to stay sober, and try to get a job, and do all this stuff and be responsible. And, how quickly can I do it. When I'm sober, it's almost like I go in overdrive, to make up for the lost time from when I was drinking. And then I burn myself out, and I say, OK, I want to have a little fun, and my mind tells me, 'It is OK to have a drink.' And I will.

And before I know it, a week later, I'm back out on the street. I get kicked out of wherever I'm living, and I'm running out of money because I'm spending it all on dumb stuff like hotel rooms. Instead of saying whoa, whoa, whoa, go get some help right now, keep the money you have, because you're going to need that, and go get help right now. But this is not how my brain works sometimes.

**Where are you in your recovery?** I'm still at the beginning steps of recovery. You've got to start

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somewhere. Crawl before you walk. I can't get ahead of myself. I can't start thinking about what job I'm going to get, or where I'm going to live. It is just one day at a time. Right now, I am just going to make it through today.

AA is good. I think the 12 steps work, and they work for life in general. You don't even have to apply them for any kind of addiction. It's just a good way to live. But you have to live it. I've also done CBT, cognitive behavioral therapy, and that has its merits as well. People have to find what works for them.

It is so important to have a good support. And setting small goals. Like getting a job takes time. I get frustrated when it takes so much time. Now, getting older, I see that when I try to force things, and when they don't happen, I say 'that didn't work,' and give up real quick, and then self-loathing sets in.

**Do you have long-term goals?** My long-term goal is to travel, to have experiences. I know what happens when I get bored. A couple years ago, when I was living in a recovery house, for six Fridays in a row, I went into town with a sign on my bike "Free hugs and high-fives." I'd talk to people, to complete strangers, and say someone cares. Spread positivity. COVID has kind of ruined that for me. Can't do that anymore.

**Do you have any advice?** If I could give advice to people who have problems like this, it would be 'Never give up.' I'm never going to give up. It may take me a million times, but I'll keep trying. I'm not going to stop trying. Once you stop trying, it's over. You have to have hope that you can get better. I have hope, always.

**What advice would your 36-year-old-self give to your 22-year-old-self?** I would say if you have any inkling that you might have a problem, go to an open meeting. Just sit back and listen. If you say, 'I've been drinking a lot, I've been drinking more than my friends. And they drink a lot. Maybe this is getting out of hand.' And if something resonates, then maybe you do have a problem. It is never too early to get help, and there is no shame in it.

When I was younger, my friends said, 'man, you are drinking a lot.' But I thought I was still functioning. I'd say to my 22-year-old self, don't make a "When List." Like, I will quit drinking "when I get a DWI." Or, I'll quit drinking "when I run out of money." Because you will keep pushing it and pushing it. Don't make a list like that, and remember it is never too early to get help, and not to give up. That's the most important thing, never give up.

**What advice would you give to yourself now?** It is never too early to get help, and never to late to get help.

**What advice would you have for parents and others who love you?** Don't enable. My parents have shown me tough love, and that's what it takes. It's hard for a parent to say no to a child. But there's nothing worse for an alcoholic than their parents to say, 'It's OK, you can come and drink here.' Or to say, 'we know you're having a tough time, so here's some booze.' Help someone only if they are willing to help themselves. It is their life, and you can't make choices for them.

**Have you learned any lessons?** It is never too early to get help. Don't be ashamed to get help. When I was younger, I thought maybe I should go to AA. But I thought, no, because then I'd have to admit I was an alcoholic. I was afraid of what people would think of me. And then I thought, what do they think of me now, anyway? They think of me as a drunk! And that's even worse.

**What would you say to anyone who is at their lowest point?** I'd say, don't lose hope. You've got so much bad stuff going on, you're down there, you've hit rock bottom, take a chance. It may be scary, but take a chance, go to an AA meeting. If you're struggling, don't give up.

Postscript:

Luke's alcoholism inevitably has affected his family deeply. His mother and father have done everything they could to help. They love their son. Luke's mother wrote a poignant response to this chapter of his story:

"Thank you for writing and sharing Luke's story. Having lived through all of this with Luke, reading it still breaks my heart. I don't think anyone can imagine the heartache and heartbreak a mother has to endure when the realization hits that nothing we can do will help or fix our "troubled" child. I will never give up hope that someday someone or something will come into Luke's life that will be the turning point for him."