

**CHALLENGING ADDICTIONS
EXPERIENCE—JOHN MISIEWICH, SAN CLEMENTE, CALIF.
LIVING WITH DIGNITY**

John Misiewich achieves a life of sobriety and becomes a registered nurse.

I was born in Hammond, Ind., into an environment where alcoholism was the norm. My father was alcoholic, and died from alcoholic cirrhosis. From the stories I heard, I suspect my grandfathers, as well as numerous uncles, were also alcoholic. One memory I have as a kid my father drinking with a favorite uncle in the kitchen—one moment he was standing up, the next he was unconscious on the floor. So drinking was not that unfamiliar for me, in fact it was something I aspired to. That's what I saw my role models doing and that's what I wanted to do as well.

My mother died when I was 12 from a long and painful bout with cancer. This certainly caused me (as well as my brother and father) a great deal of pain. Coming from the family I did, I had very poor coping skills from the beginning, and my father had been out of control for a long time. He went from bad to worse, drunk every day and abusive. He used to throw me out of the house in the middle of winter and pass out, not letting me back in. Finally, when I was about 15, he threw me out and I never returned. I stayed with my aunt and grandmother.

When I started drinking at about age 14, it was just magic for me. My emotional pain vanished and I was gone. When I say gone, I mean taken into my own alcoholism. I never believed it could happen to me. In a short time, I went from being a fairly nice kid with good grades to out of control and failing in school. I spent the next 17 years constructing my version of the life-condition of Hell.

Dropping out of high school, I joined the Navy and eventually made a mess of that. After that I stayed in California and just pretty much drank, used drugs, lost jobs, got arrested on a regular basis and became a general nuisance. There were periods of homelessness and hopelessness. I became unemployable; the last job I lost was from a self-serve gas station. To survive, I would often go into the dumpsters of supermarkets. My own death could not be far off, I believed, as a few of my contemporaries had already died from the kinds of things I was doing.

During this period when I was about 29, I encountered the Buddhism of Nichiren Daishonin. I started chanting and getting some benefits. I began to study and comprehend some of the basic concepts. I received my Gohonzon and practiced as best I could. Then one night as I was headed for this local dumpster, a bag lady in front of me, out of the blue it occurred to me, something was wrong with this picture. What was wrong was that I was in it!

At 29, was this the best I could do? All in a rush, I understood that what had led me here were my own decisions. I could no longer blame my upbringing, my parents or my bad luck. Some of those things were true, but I was an adult now and I was responsible for my life. Although I did not quite understand what my problem was, I knew the answer was in me, not outside.

Through my Buddhist practice, I started to understand that I was creating my own misery. "If you want to understand the causes that existed in the past, look at the results as they are manifested in the present. And if you want to understand what results will be

manifested in the future, look at the causes that exist in the present” (*The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, p. 279). I realized there would be no “and he lived happily ever after” if I kept living this way. I prayed, like so many others, that “I did not know what to do, but I could not live this way any more, and I would do whatever it took to change, no matter what!”

A couple of weeks later my aunt and uncle put me into detox. I did not even know what a detox was. I was still pretty crazy. I only remember a few things; one was this counselor who said that of the people there, only about three or four would remain sober one year from then. I made a determination that I would be one of them.

When I got out, I started going to twelve-step meetings recommended by my counselor. The way I saw it, if you want to get sober, you need to hang out with people that have done it—that’s what I got from twelve-step meetings. I was so brain damaged I could hardly read. It took about three months of sobriety before I fully understood what the problem was. It was my thinking—I had a skewed view of reality. I did know this, though: If I drank again I would use drugs, and if I used drugs I would surely die.

I focused my Buddhist practice on my recovery. I established daily morning prayer as a part of my life. I believe I experienced great benefit during the process. No records are kept, but I imagine only about 10 percent of the people who come into recovery stay sober.

I was sober for about four months when someone asked me if I would like to drive a van for a recovery hospital to take patients to twelve-step meetings twice a week. I said sure, but maybe I should see if the Department of Motor Vehicles would give me my driver’s license back first. Well, they did, so I took the offer. I realized that this was a benefit, this was helping me stay sober; at least I was too busy and tired to drink.

Since I could not find anything better than minimum wage jobs, I returned to school, thinking of SGI President Ikeda’s guidance to focus on a humanistic education. I wanted to help people and that was my determination and prayer. I continued chanting and again got involved with my district activities. Then, like with anything else in life you want to accomplish, I had to not only make the effort but sustain it over an extended period of time. I earned an associate’s degree in human services.

After a time, and more struggle, I finally got a position in a local psychiatric hospital—a tough job, but I got some great experience. I learned how to deal with some very difficult people and experienced many tremendous benefits. I could have been hurt so many times, but somehow at the last minute, someone would show up or the patient would calm down or the situation would change. I worked with some very talented therapists. One in particular took the time to help me grow professionally, and become skilled at leading groups and group process. During this time, a nurse there asked me if I would start a recovery home using one of her properties. I agreed and started a little recovery home in Capistrano Beach where I lived and received free board in exchange for my services. In addition, I made the determination to get an RN license.

I had saved some money from managing the recovery home, which I used for school, starting in January 1998. After my first semester, I realized how little I knew about the hospital environment and actual working conditions. After getting my Certified Nurse’s Assistant (CNA) license, I began working as an aid on a critical care floor at a local hospital. It was very difficult work, but a great learning opportunity.

I had so many obstacles in school, I am amazed I came out okay. I graduated in December 1999 from nursing school, and even passed the state boards.

But my life is just like an adventure movie sometimes. It’s like Indiana Jones—just

when you think he is safe, something else happens. Same with me. This time it was the Department of Justice. When applying for my nursing license, I had to be forthright about my past arrests. The Board of Registered Nursing was not satisfied with my admission of the past; they wanted documentation. I had to prove I was guilty of the things I told them about. The Department of Justice ran a background check on me that took five months. When the rest of my classmates were already working, there was old John, still working as an aid. I was pretty low, there was no way I could do anything about the process I was caught in. When I tried, I just ran into a brick wall. I was just about to give up—even I have a breaking point—when my license came through.

Throughout this experience, I have been talking about how I did this or I did that. I must not forget to mention that I had the help of many wonderful people all along the way. Certainly as I look at it now, it was the positive functions of the universe manifesting in my life. I have a wonderful A.A. sponsor, who is a living example of integrity and has always been there for me. There are many people in the SGI-USA who have been just as important. In my district, they accepted me when my own family had disowned me. There have been members encouraging me all along the way. I now understand that no one exists in a vacuum, how all life is interdependent—we all are dependent on one another.

Currently, I am employed full time at the same hospital where I worked as an aid—a tremendously encouraging thing for many of the staff there. I recently completed my probationary period. I now know why there are not more men in nursing—it's just too hard—12-hour shifts, all on your feet. You must be focused the whole time. If you let your attention wander even for a moment, you are running even faster to try and catch up.

Then there is the spiritual or emotional aspect of what I am doing. I have already seen and done some things I cannot even believe. Nursing is all about people, life and death and human dignity.

My life is still like an Indiana Jones picture sometimes, but the movie is not over. I get the chance to write the script every day, and for me it starts with morning prayers and my original determination to help people—not bad for a guy who was waiting in line for a spot at the dumpster.