



Chapter 2

Adolescent Years


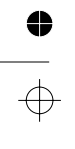
When my dad was promoted to national sales manager in 1967, we moved away from my childhood outdoor paradise in southern Ohio. Moving was a real culture shock for me. The kids in Chicago were very different.

The main thing I remember was that it was okay to fistfight in school. Kids who ratted on other kids were looked down upon, and bullies got away with murder on the playground. Several kids made fun of me because I carried a briefcase to school and wore a brown corduroy hat. I loved corduroy and still do, but those kids at my new school hated that hat and wanted to fight me for it my first day in school!

The kids had been learning Spanish in school, but I was totally lost because we moved in February and the school year was nearly over. It was a tough time for all of the Balzer kids. My sister stayed back in Beavercreek so she could graduate with her high school class. That was a great move. She never stuck around much, and married at age nineteen soon after moving to Chicago.

Almost Heaven

I remember getting up one Saturday morning in 1967 to go out to the local airport in Lombard, Illinois. This was a magical place with several hangars and lots of airplanes. Sometimes, kids got lucky. My friend John told me about a fellow who was taking him up in his helicopter. I figured if I



hung around up there long enough, I might find somebody willing to take me up for an airplane ride, especially if I offered to help wash his plane.

As I rode my bike down the block toward the airport, I could hear the sounds of roaring bulldozer engines and tearing metal, followed by loud bangs. I pedaled closer and spotted clouds of dust and piles of twisted metal where the hangars had been.

The airport was being shut down! I just could not believe it. Later, I learned that the airport property had been sold to developers who wanted to build condominiums. As a twelve-year-old kid, I had remained totally unaware of the local battle that had raged over this valuable piece of real estate. So I was devastated—it all happened so fast, and I had no advance warning. Now the airport was gone, piled up and twisted—and along with it my hope of getting an airplane ride and learning more about flying, at least for the time being.

Music as My Salvation

I was very small for my age. I loved sports and played everything, but by the time high school rolled around I wasn't good enough to compete with so many kids in such a large school. I couldn't hit a baseball to save my life.

But I still loved beating pots and pans. To my delight, I discovered a small but very talented drum and twirling corps called the Velvet Viking Cadets. The group practiced in the parking lot of a shopping center right up the street from our house in Lombard. It was a precision unit, and I loved to watch it practice. One night I mustered up the courage to ask the director if I could join.

She looked me over carefully. "Do you think you can cut it?"

I had no prior experience, not even with the basic snare drum, but I stuck out my chin and confidently replied, "Yes, I can!"

When she agreed to give me a chance, I was bound and determined I would not let her down; I practiced hard every day. When I was 17 years old I won the individual snare drum solo championship at Notre Dame University. Our unit won several national championships. The city council threw a big party for us, and I got to ride in a parade through town in the back of an early-model Corvette convertible.

Drum corps was the best thing that ever happened to me. It was great for my self-esteem, and for the first time I really felt part of something special.

Plus, it was such a great group of kids; everyone worked so hard. Many of those “kids” remain my close friends to this day.

After high school I joined the all-male Cavaliers Drum and Bugle Corps out of Chicago. What an incredible experience that was, traveling throughout the country and competing with other corps from across the United States. During my years with the outfit I marched with a driven and incredibly talented drum line.

The discipline, dedication, teamwork, and commitment to excellence I learned in these two fine drum corps would serve me well in the coming years.

The Beginning of Drinking

I have a confession to make. The first time I got staggering drunk I was three years old.

My mother had left me with my great grandfather, and we were sitting in front of his house on a beautiful summer day. He handed me his “long neck” brown beer bottle to hold. I don’t remember whether he expected me to drink, or told me to, but when he went into the house to get something I helped myself to his beer. At that age, just a few gulps was all it took.

When my mom discovered her little boy flat-out drunk and unable to stand, she exploded. That was the last time I ever saw my great-grandpa. I don’t know whether my mom banished him, or whether he just passed away. He was 94 years old—and he loved his beer.

High School Teetotaler

Thankfully, there was never any occasion for me to drink in high school. My friends who were athletes did all the drinking, while I hung out with the musicians. We musicians did other things besides drinking, such as play music and practice, practice, practice. The jocks, as a general rule, loved to drink beer—or at least pretended they loved it. I figured that out during my senior year when I went to a few parties and found that nearly everyone but me was totally loaded. I just didn’t have any interest in drinking at that time in my life. Besides, my dad was doing it at home.

I enjoyed the sober time I spent with my girlfriend, and marching and learning new rhythms in drum corps. I also had a great job at the local drugstore, which kept me busy three nights a week and on the weekends. I

often rode my bike the twelve miles one-way to my girlfriend's house. How could you drink and do that?

Back then, drinking didn't make any sense to me. We even had a beautiful wet bar I helped my father build in our basement, but I never found a need or a reason to use it—at least, throughout high school.

College: A Different Story

The first time I truly went away from home was when I left for college. For some reason, I got it in my head that it was time to begin drinking, like everyone else. I was away from my girlfriend and really didn't know how to fit in with the college party scene, so I started cracking beers alone in my room. At first, I didn't really like it, but a habit set in. I began with two quarts of beer every Friday night. My drinking never interfered with my studies, and I rarely drank on weekdays, although the school I attended—Northern Illinois University—was known for big parties that started every Thursday afternoon and ended late Sunday night.

Heavy drinking was the norm on campus. We students in the dormitories got together to host our own “keg” parties. We'd start with one keg of beer and go through as many as the liquor store would sell us or we could afford. All the freshmen were under the legal drinking age, but as long as you pitched in for the keg and invited some cute girls, you were welcome. And you could drink until someone had to carry you home.

Blackout #1

My first alcoholic blackout occurred at one of these dorm parties. The residents of a particular dorm, located across the campus, invited our entire university marching band to party one night. Four hundred members strong, the Husky Band was not to be outdone. We set out to prove that we could out-drink and out-party anyone on campus. Moreover, there were lots of upperclassmen in the marching band who could teach us the art of imbibing.

I set out to drink like everyone else at the party, but at some point I lost control and could not remember what I was doing. By that time there wasn't anyone left at the party I knew. I do remember being staggering drunk and trying to walk home in a freezing blizzard. The effect of the alcohol hit me rapidly, and continued to get worse even though I had stopped drinking. Within minutes my hands and feet were numb, my face was frozen, and I

found myself staring a four-lane highway in the face. The wide concrete barrier stood between me and the dormitory I lived in. It was slick, covered with a thin layer of snow, and the college kids driving on it were moving way too fast for the existing conditions.

The drivers might have seen me on the highway if I had been walking or standing upright, but by this time it was impossible for me to stand. No matter how hard I tried, my legs just would not cooperate. So, determined to make it home, I decided the only way to cross the highway was to roll myself across. Literally . . . *roll my way across*.

For a while the idea seemed like a good one. But then I spotted the headlights of an oncoming car. My heart leaped into my mouth when I discovered I was unable to stand up and get out of the way. I began to roll with a new sense of urgency, knowing that in a few seconds, if I did not get out of the way, I would be smashed into human “road kill” in the middle of a four-lane highway. The car roared by so close to me that the tires threw slush from the road into my face.

Panic-stricken, I continued rolling my way across. Along the way I vomited until there was nothing left in my stomach; then the dry heaves started. I was so dizzy I could barely think. Exhausted and confused, I stopped to get my bearings. I made out the lights of my dormitory, and finally got back to my room. The only thing that saved my life that night was sheer luck in avoiding a car, and the heavy band uniform overcoat we wore during the winter days. Without the latter, I very easily could have fallen asleep and frozen to death.

For some warped reason, I really thought everyone drank like this—all the way to blackout, that is. Frankly, I was uncomfortable around people, and drinking made me relax and feel like a part of the crowd. I believed that without the alcohol I would feel very alone at school and would not fit in socially.

To this day I don’t know why, but my drinking did not have a negative effect on my college work. I did quite well and graduated with my B.S. degree in the summer of 1977.

I did not have a car until my senior year, and I don’t remember driving under the influence of alcohol. Still, there must have been times when I had no business driving, yet did so anyway. I definitely did not understand that drinking to blackout was a strong indicator for early stage-one alcoholism. It would be many years before I was able to put that information to good use. Until then, I was a train wreck looking for a place to happen.