

# GETTING WASTED: The Highs & The Lows

By Sandy M. Fernández

*For some of us, taking that first drink is just another rite of passage, like surviving the SATs or passing driver's ed. For others, however, it's a dangerous step in the wrong direction. Here, five kids talk about the price they paid when alcohol led them down a path of self-destruction, and what happened when they finally decided to come clean.*



It's 11 p.m. on a Friday in Estes Park, CO,

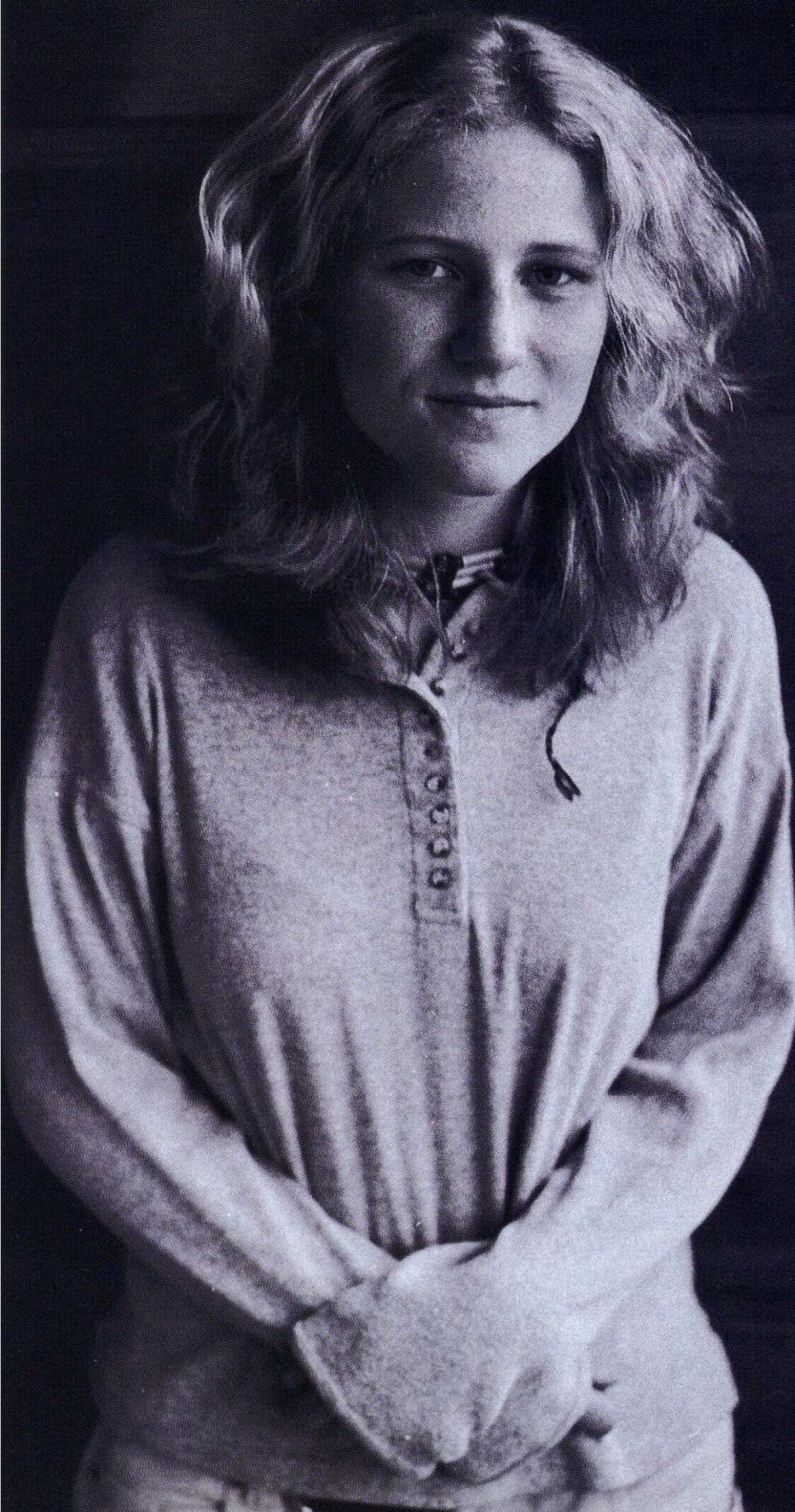
and nearly 1,000 of the biggest, baddest partiers on the planet are crammed into a huge, steamy, hot dance hall. These are the types of revelers you'd never want to crash a party in your neighborhood. The kind who've trashed houses, caused fights and occasionally lit things on fire. A guy wearing little more than a grass skirt jerks across the floor to the pounding bass-driven beat, while a dazed and sweaty Sinéad look-alike does a slow, snaky dance toward the stage. All of

Over 2,000 kids, most under the age of 20, attended the 40th Annual ICYPAA convention.

a sudden, a tall boy in oversized pants climbs onto the shoulders of his buddy, starts (continued on page 92)

Veronica / 15 / Falmouth, MA

Sober 11 months★



*Growing up, I felt alienated.* It just seemed like I was different from everybody in some vague way. But pot and alcohol changed all that. I was 12 years old the first time I got drunk. Even though I knew alcoholism ran in the family (my mom is a recovering alcoholic), I didn't care. When I drank, all my fears and feelings of isolation vanished. By the time I was 14, I was doing speed and acid too. But mostly I just drank.

I had a lot of older friends, and if their parents weren't home, we'd go to their houses and party all day. After a while, though, I started to do it alone. I was too paranoid to be around people. I was always worried about when and where I was gonna get my next drink or drug, or what people were saying about me behind my back.

I try not to regret what I did when I was drinking, but it's hard. I was so awful to my family. I was always stealing money from them, and I lied constantly. When my mom tried to tell me to stop, I would spit in her face.

By my freshman year, things were getting bad. People were talking about me at school. I'd been at a party and wound up having sex with this random guy. Everybody knew about it. I don't remember what happened. I think I tried to say "no," but I'm not really sure. Honestly, things like that happened. I wasn't even conscious the first time I had sex; I was passed out cold. The second time, I was too drunk to say anything, and by the third time, I no longer cared.

I got sober in the middle of my freshman year. A lot of people who don't know my story probably think I'm too young to be an alcoholic, and that maybe I was just going through some kind of stage. Believe me, I've tried to convince myself of that too. But you don't have to be literally dying to face the facts.

When I made my first attempt to quit drinking, I was still hanging out with my old friends, which was a very shaky thing to do. I relapsed three times. But, eventually, I started to listen to what other people in my shoes had to say: To stay clean, I'd have to let go of my old ways, including friends.

Today, I have so many more options. The opportunities that come my way are huge. I've also started to help other people, just as people helped me in the beginning. This makes me feel really serene. I don't feel great 24-7, but now if some awful feeling comes up, it's not the end of the world. Last summer I went to Germany for two weeks. When I was drinking, I would never have done anything like that.

Photographed by Carlos Serrao

pumping his skinny arms in the air and yells, "Sober! Sober! Sober!"

Yup. Everyone in here is as dry as a bone.

Welcome to the 40th Annual International Conference of Young People in Alcoholics Anonymous (ICYPAA). By Saturday night, more than 2,000 people—most of whom are under the age of 20—will have migrated here to spend three raucous days celebrating the fact that they are clean and sober. One guy will travel by bus 14 hours to get here. Two young women will ride their Harleys all the way from the East Coast. Sure, it may sound radical—until you consider the extremes they used to go to get high.

AA is one of the most effective recovery programs in the world. For years, fighting alcoholism was the group's sole purpose. These days, however, alcohol abuse and drug addiction practically go hand in hand, especially among young people. Studies show that high school students are now drinking more than college kids, and record numbers are trying drugs like cocaine, LSD and heroin. So AA has adapted with youth-friendly meetings and literature, and events like this ICYPAA convention.

Clearly, gatherings like these aren't for wimps. While not everyone here has been arrested or experienced an overdose, they don't mind if you have. As one guy explained, "The more messed up you once were, the more we like you!"

Recovery from drug and alcohol addiction isn't just about owning up to the damage you've done and the tough and terrifying journey of withdrawal. It's also about how cool life can be once you're sober and drug-free. At least that's what we discovered after hearing these first-person accounts.

## Who Wants a Cold One?

■ More than 8 million teens between the ages of 12 and 17 have experimented with alcohol in their lifetimes. 4.2 million of them had a drink last month.

■ About 1.6 million of those teens were binge drinkers, meaning they consumed five or more drinks in a single sitting.

■ Almost 650,000 of teens who drink, drink heavily, bingeing at least five times per month.

■ White high school students reported the highest percentage of frequent binge drinking, followed by Native Americans, Hispanics, Asians and African-Americans.

■ People with alcoholic parents are four times as likely as their peers to become alcoholics.

Kayla / 25 / Denver, CO

Sober 2 years, 6 months\*

*I took my first drink* at a party when I was 14. It was magic. For the first time in my life, I felt like I fit in. Liquor was my liquid courage. I threw up that night. I thought everybody did the first time. But then I threw up the second time, and the third time, and the 12th. By the time I was in high school, I was smoking weed and doing cocaine too.

I'm what's called a mystery alcoholic. My parents don't drink at all.

My dad always told me I was the sensitive one. I had way too many emotions and didn't know what to do with them. I had more anger in me than my little body could hold, and drinking made my feelings go away. As long as I was drunk or high, I didn't know when I was sad; I didn't know when I was angry; I didn't know when I was happy.

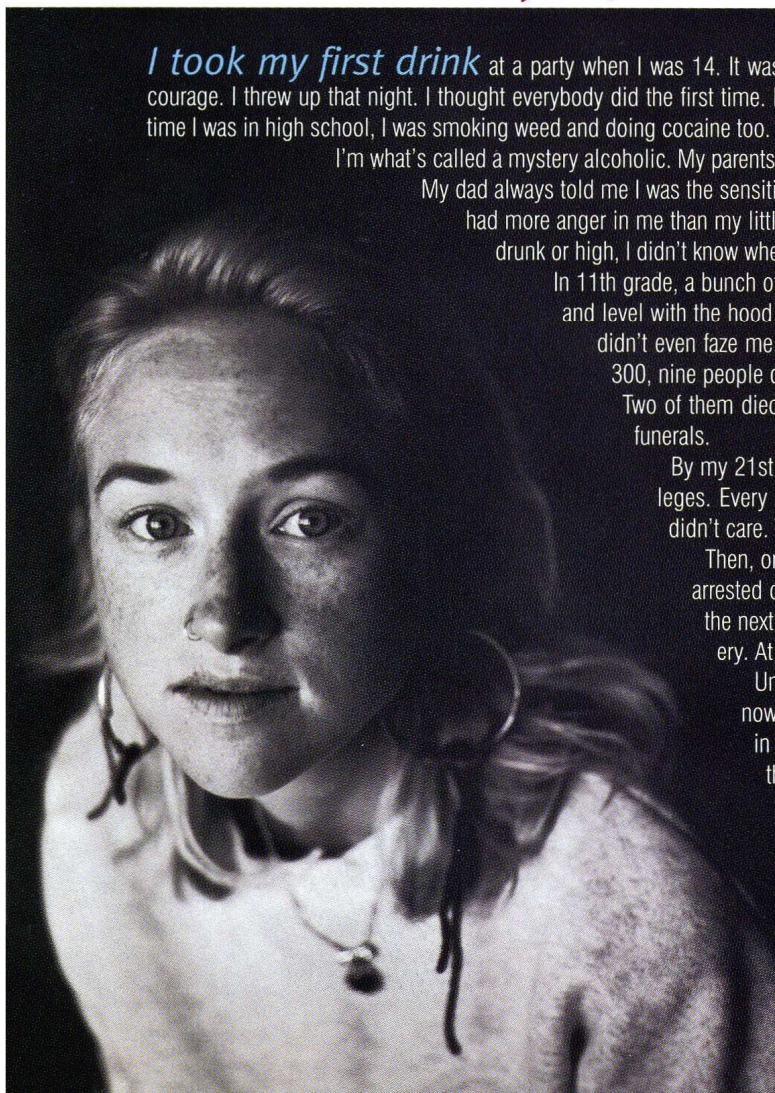
In 11th grade, a bunch of us got drunk and rolled a Jeep Cherokee. The whole top was smashed down and level with the hood of the car. Somebody should have died, but I guess we got lucky. The wreck didn't even faze me. At that point, I really didn't care if I lived or died. In my graduating class of 300, nine people died from suicide or drinking-related accidents. Five of them were my friends.

Two of them died on prom night, in a car I was supposed to be in. I didn't go to any of their funerals.

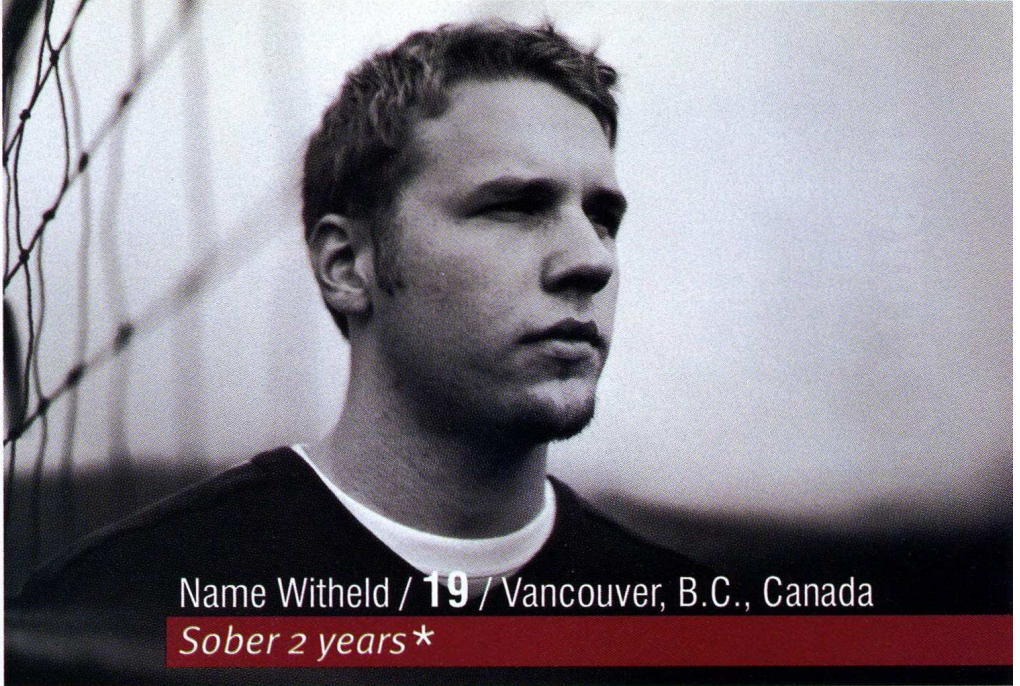
By my 21st birthday, I was a chemical-waste dump, and I'd been kicked out of four colleges. Every day was a bad day. Boyfriends left me because I couldn't stop using, but I didn't care. There was no cutting back.

Then, one night it all came crashing down on me. I hadn't totaled a car. I hadn't been arrested or wound up in the streets. But I knew I had reached the end. When I came to the next day, I remembered an old friend who had once given me a book about recovery. At 5 o'clock that evening, I made a call for help.

Until that day, I didn't know how to admit out loud that I was messed up. But now, "mistake," "wrong" and "surrender" are some of the most liberating words in my vocabulary. I was able to go back to my dad and ask, "How can I make this right?" When I did that, he offered to pay for college. I'm in my third year now, studying American Sign Language. My family still doesn't understand me, but they're starting to trust me. I'm in a relationship with someone who loves me unconditionally. If you had told me three years ago that I'd be livin' life without partying and loving it, I would have given you an earful. But the truth is, I really am loving my life. Honestly, it doesn't get better than this!



Below: One string at a time: Two newly sober girls bond at an ICYPAA party by exchanging pieces of yarn from their "fuzzies" (necklaces that are traditionally handed out at every convention).



Name Witheld / 19 / Vancouver, B.C., Canada  
Sober 2 years\*

*In eighth grade*, these older girls—seniors—thought my friend and I were cute, right? So they were all, "Let's get them drunk." They took us out and bought a bunch of beer and got us drunk at one of their houses. I remember thinking, "This is what guys are supposed to do." When I woke up the next day, I said to my friend, "We should get drunk every day."

People talk about alcoholism being a disease. I believe I've had it since that first drink. Right away, that's what I was about. I was about alcohol.

My friend and I started drinking on the weekends. We'd hang out in front of the liquor store and get older people to buy for us. That went on for about a year. I never got sick. I never felt hung over. And I could drink a lot without getting drunk.

Then some older friends introduced us to weed. I loved the stuff. All I had to do was smoke a joint and I was ripped. So then, I'd drink on the weekends and smoke weed every day at school.

Until that point, I'd basically been this caring, touchy-feely, almost feminine kind of guy. I was raised by just my mom. And I think I had a complex about becoming a "real man." I assumed guys who had real families with dads were tough—cooler than I was—and that they could kick the shit out of anybody. I wanted to be bad. Thanks to all the drinking and smoking, I got an attitude all right. And pretty soon, I was getting into a lot of fights and becoming quite the punk.

Then I hooked up with some really smooth guys. They drove brand-new BMWs, Corvettes and souped-up Hondas. They had stacks of cash, nice-looking girlfriends and expensive clothes. I wanted what they had, and I didn't care that they got it by selling coke and heroin. My new goal was to become a drug dealer.

At 15 years old, not only was I doing pot, alcohol and cocaine, I was also a heroin addict. It was complete hell. Over a period of two years, I went into detox twice and tried to quit on my own, oh, eight times. It was crazy. When I finally went into rehab, I was the last guy anyone would have ever predicted could stay sober. I'd failed so many times before. But this time was different. While I was in the hospital, I started to reach out and met some really amazing people. There were kids in there I actually thought were cool. It was a major turning point for me. Of course, that didn't mean I was suddenly cured, but I made a decision to make a conscious effort to get clean.

That was two years ago. Since then I took my GED, scored really well and was accepted into college. I'm doing well in school for the first time in my life, and I'm hooking up with so many hip kids who are sober. They're helping me realize that doing things, like playing sports or just hanging out, is a lot more fun than doing heroin and beating people up.

The friends I used to drink and do drugs with don't want to know how I'm doing these days. And they definitely don't want to see me around. They only care about their alcohol and drugs. They're sick, so I don't blame them. But I have real friends now who actually care about me, buddies who will bend over backward to help me. And you know what? I'd do anything for them too. It's crazy. I used to just take and take and take. I thought that was the only way to get what I wanted and to feel good. And now, it turns out that being a giving person is what really gets me high. Isn't that a trip?

## Reasons to Hold the Hooch

- Women have more trouble processing alcohol than men, so you'll get drunk faster than a guy.
- Binge drinkers are more likely to miss class, get into fights, get into trouble, damage property and hurt themselves and others.
- Drunken driving accidents are the leading cause of death and disability among teens.
- About 10,000 teens per year die in booze-related drownings, homicides, fires and suicides.
- You're much more likely to consent to sex with someone you don't know if you've been drinking. And you're less likely to use a condom.
- Close to 40% of high school guys say it's okay to push a girl to have sex if she's stoned or drunk.
- Women don't have to drink as much as men to develop problems with alcohol, and their health problems surface more quickly.
- If you're pregnant, even the occasional social drink can harm your baby.

# No Problem? Prove it.

Answer the following “yes” or “no” questions:

- 1 Do you talk about your drinking or using often?
- 2 Do you drink or get high because you're upset or stressed out?
- 3 Are most of your friends people you drink or get high with?
- 4 Have you missed school or work because of alcohol or drugs?
- 5 Have you ever gotten the shakes?
- 6 Do you drink or use before school?
- 7 Have you ever gotten a DWI?
- 8 Do you ever black out?
- 9 Do your friends or family members think you have a problem?
- 10 Do you drink or get high by yourself?
- 11 Have you tried to control your drinking—for example, trying to go x number of days without anything?
- 12 Do you double up or gulp drinks at parties, or drink and/or use more drugs than your friends?
- 13 Do you drink or use in order to “get ready” to go out?
- 14 Do you ever hide how much you're drinking from others?
- 15 Has your drinking or drug use caused conflict with your friends or family?

In general, the more “yes” answers, the worse off you are. If you said “yes” to three or more, you should watch your intake. If you said “yes” to more than four, chances are you have a problem. A hint: Experts say that people who worry, or even wonder, if they drink or use too much usually do!

Source: Adapted from the Indiana University Alcohol-Drug Information Center.

Name Witheld /13 / Rockford,IL

Sober 3 days \*

*I was basically weaned* off a beer bottle. My family owns a bar. They've had it for, like, 60 years. So drinking was always a part of our lives. I had my first cigarette when I was seven. Seven years old. I had my first drink when I was eight. I live with my grandparents and I drank with them a lot. When I was little and my grandparents were plastered, I'd ask if I could have a margarita or a glass of gin and they'd say, “Sure, as long as you make me one too.” My mom doesn't know I drink. My dad knows, because I used to get drunk with him too.

I'm not like normal kids: I've pissed on the floor many times. I've gotten so drunk I couldn't see. I've never stolen anything, but I can lie really well.

I've done a lot of damage to myself. One time, I banged a fork through the tip of my tongue. I've also gotten so drunk that I've fallen down stairs. Well, I think that's what happened, because I woke up at the bottom of them. Once, I cut myself on the back of the head and my cousin used toilet paper to try to stop the bleeding.

I went to a Narcotics Anonymous meeting for the first time about a month ago—with my dad. The meetings are kind of freaky. I want to stop drinking and drugging, but there are some things I still haven't tried. The last time I got *really* high was two weeks ago, and the last time I smoked pot was Tuesday. But that wasn't anything. That wasn't a problem. I don't need it. I've taken care of the problem, so it's okay. I can stop when I want to.





Angela / 18 / West Valley City, UT

*Sober 8 months\**

*When I was in junior high*, my house was the party spot. I'm the youngest of four and the only girl. My parents divorced when I was eight, and we lived with my mom. She drank, and so did my brothers. I wanted to be just like my brothers—you know, play football, be a tomboy, drink. By age 12, I was doing just that. I was also smoking pot and shoplifting at the mall.

By age 14, I was having sex every weekend with different guys to get booze and drugs. I liked mixed drinks best, like Tequila Sunrises and daiquiris. I liked whiskey too—Jack Daniel's Old No. 7 Brand Old-Time Tennessee Sour Mash. Give me a fifth of that and, damn, five hours later I'm dancing on the table, stripping or something. When I went to parties, I'd be anything you wanted me to be. I was the best actor. I could do anything. I could dance. I could flirt. I could hide any real emotion. I'd just push it down into my gut so I didn't have to feel it.

Then came the crystal meth, crank and cocaine. At 15, I was drinking every day; I'd take a bottle with me to school. I had to have something in my body at all times or I'd just shake. I knew I had a problem, but I never thought that I was bad, you know, like an alcoholic or something. I would look under the viaducts downtown, at the brown paper bag bums and I'd think, when I get that bad, then maybe, maybe I'll stop.

Finally, at 17, I had gotten into so much trouble I was sent to an alternative school. I'd been caught shoplifting and busted for cocaine, and I was put on probation by the courts.

One day, I looked in the mirror and, I swear, I didn't even recognize myself. My eyes were sunken. I was pale. And I was dirty. I just started crying. Everything I said I would never do, I had done. The courts sent me to outpatient treatment, so I'd go home at night. My mother was still drinking and my brothers were still using, so I would too. After a couple of weeks, the treatment center told my mom they would put me in a foster home if things didn't change. So my mom would go to a bar to drink, and she sent my brothers out of the house to party.

Without the drugs and alcohol, I was so lonely. For two months, I sat in my room and cried. Quitting is the easy part. I mean, you can quit seven times in one day. It's staying quit that's the hard part. To keep my mind off drugs, I had to keep myself busy at all times. Mostly, I'd write. I started to get out my feelings through poetry, and I guess it worked.

I used to wonder, why me? Why did I have to get this disease? But now I wonder, how did I get so lucky? Lucky enough to get sober, you know? Not very many people get sober. A lot of people die trying.

Through the treatment center, I was able to finish high school and graduate with my class, and I'm not on probation anymore. I introduced my mom to recovery and she's been sober ever since. The counselors at the center have asked me to come back and work for them, and I'm going to college. Whether it's this year or next year, I'm going. But every day is still a struggle. I have to fight to stay clean. I've had to say good-bye to my brothers and my friends, because they're still using.

Any second I could just forget and start drinking again. And I don't want to do that. I wouldn't trade my sobriety for anything in the world. But you just never know. ■

## Callable Help

Alcohol and Drug  
Helpline  
(800) 821-HELP

## Writeable Help

Alcoholics Anonymous  
475 Riverside Dr.  
New York, NY 10115  
(212) 870-3400

Alateen  
1600 Corporate  
Landing Pkwy.  
Virginia Beach, VA  
23454;

(800) 356-9996;  
or (800) 344-2666

Web sites:

[www.alateen.org](http://www.alateen.org), or  
[www.al-non-alateen.org](http://www.al-non-alateen.org)

## Secular Organizations for Sobriety

5521 Grosvenor Blvd.  
Los Angeles, CA 90066  
(310) 821-8430

e-mail:

[sosla@loop.com](mailto:sosla@loop.com); or  
[www.unhooked.com](http://www.unhooked.com)

## Surfable Help

Web of Addictions  
[www.well.com/  
user/woa](http://www.well.com/user/woa)

Indiana University  
Alcohol-Drug  
Information Center  
[www.indiana.edu  
/~adic](http://www.indiana.edu/~adic)

Join Together  
[www.jointogether.org](http://www.jointogether.org)  
Narcotics Anonymous  
[www.netwizards.net/  
recovery/na/](http://www.netwizards.net/recovery/na/)

*\*Sobriety dates may have  
changed since the  
date of publication.*