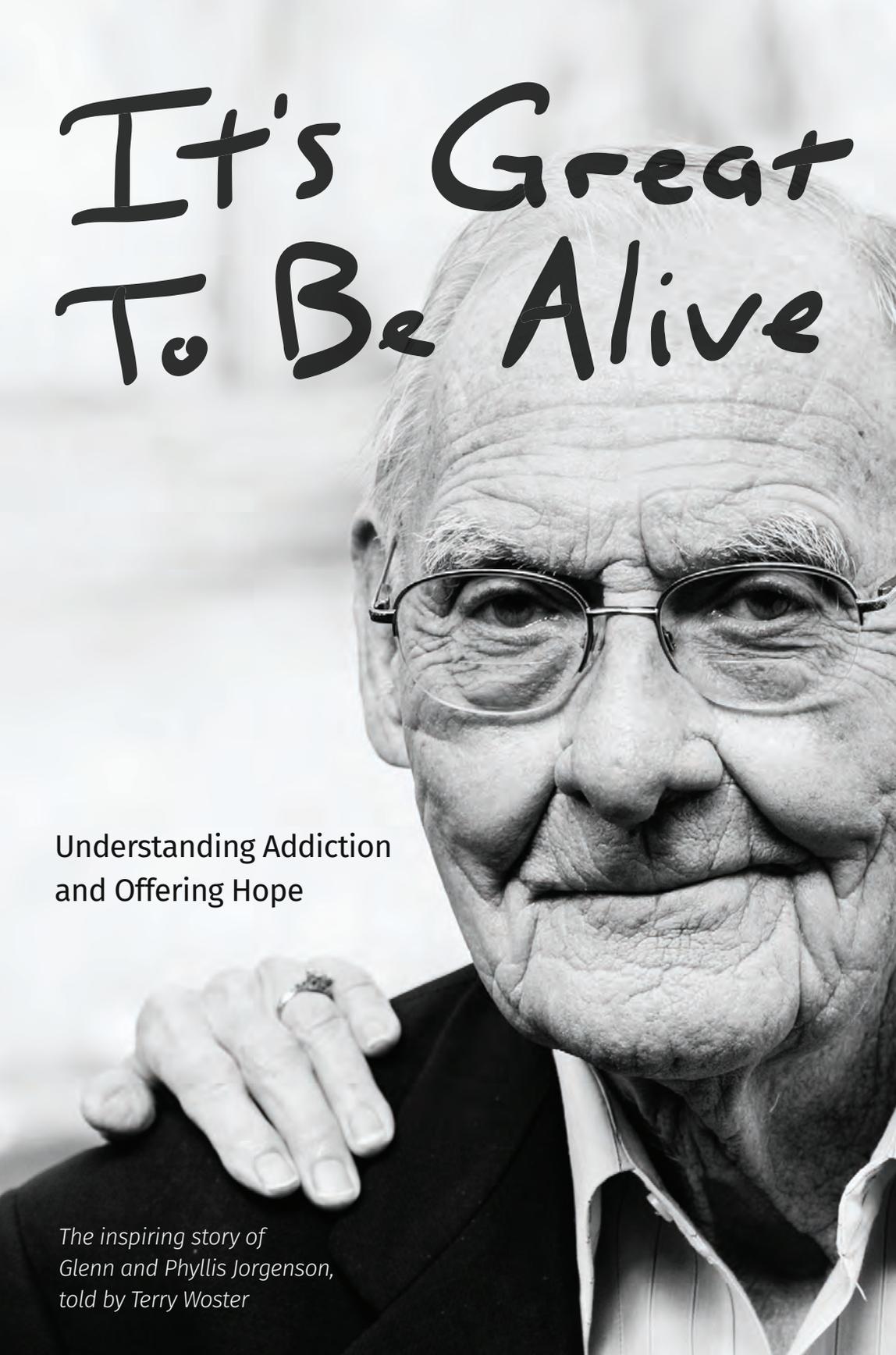


It's Great To Be Alive

A black and white close-up portrait of an elderly man with glasses, looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. A woman's hand, wearing a ring, is resting on his right shoulder. The background is blurred.

Understanding Addiction
and Offering Hope

*The inspiring story of
Glenn and Phyllis Jorgenson,
told by Terry Woster*

It's Great To Be Alive

Terry Woster
with a foreword by
Glenn and Phyllis Jorgenson



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You feel it when you enter.

Not just the physical appearance, which is beautiful, restful and tasteful, but also a kind of aura that envelops you.

At first I thought it was the people who work there. I grant they are special and a very unusual group of individuals. I can tell they do their work with dedication, and what they do is not just a job—but a career of unselfish devotion to a cause that is larger than even their personal desires or ambitions.

But it is not them, nor is it the physical attributes that give River Park the aura of quiet, peaceful consolation.

I know now what it is that brings that comforting sense of security and peace.

It is the clients who come to us and leave us, but who leave behind part of themselves, the sweet part—their gratitude, the spirit balm they found here, the purposeful living of a life of dedication they go forth to live, which they found here in a spiritual awakening, bringing serenity to their lives.

That is the magic of River Park.

—Lloyd Jorgenson (Glenn Jorgenson's father)

FOREWORD

Glenn and Phyllis Jorgenson

THIS IS THE STORY of River Park, South Dakota's first privately funded, not-for-profit treatment center for alcoholism.

It describes how, with the help of many, we opened three inpatient treatment centers in our home state—in Pierre (1971), in Rapid City (1981) and in Sioux Falls (1984). It shows how Phyllis led our efforts to meet the needs of family members of alcoholics. It traces the development of River Park's other efforts to treat the disease of alcoholism—community resource centers in eight smaller South Dakota cities and a workplace employee assistance program.

This story also documents our many efforts to expand understanding about the disease of alcoholism—our newsletters, our booklets, our presentations to civic clubs, schools and church groups across the state, our website (www.riverparksd.com), our display at the South Dakota Hall of Fame—and most of all, our television series featuring celebrities who were affected by alcoholism or other chemical dependencies.

This story includes the 1988 merger of River Park with Parkside Medical Services, a division of the Lutheran General Healthcare System, and the 1992 decision of LHS to close its alcohol treatment facilities in South Dakota.

But Terry Woster, the author of this book, has achieved far more than a recitation of the dates and events found in a conventional history.

By telling the story of his own struggle with alcoholism, and by telling the story of Glenn's similar battle, Terry illuminates the mindset of those who persist in drinking even when it becomes obvious that they are harming themselves and others.

He then shows, step by painstaking step, how the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous—seasoned with a generous dose of respect and love—can help individuals overcome addiction.

That was the core of the River Park philosophy, and it is the most important part of our history.

As we reviewed our history, we were reminded of the thousands of people who contributed to the success of River Park—government leaders, business and community supporters, clergy members, educators, celebrities, medical workers, media personnel, staff members, family members and most importantly, those recovering from alcohol or chemical dependency. Not all of them are named in this book, but our gratitude to all of them is heartfelt.

Now, after four decades of educational programs about alcoholism, we hope this book will continue those educational efforts. Perhaps a new generation of celebrities will decide to draw public attention to the problems of addiction and the need of so many for affordable, effective treatment. Maybe the stories told here will bring a ray of hope to people imprisoned in denial and despair.

We pray that the many still suffering—the afflicted and the affected—will find the way out and learn that “It’s Great to Be Alive.”

— Glenn and Phyllis Jorgenson
June 2012

PREFACE

I VISITED RIVER PARK in Pierre, South Dakota, and met its director, Glenn Jorgenson, for the first time in 1976.

The alcoholism treatment center on the east bank of the Missouri River was in its sixth year, preparing to launch a series of television programs featuring celebrities who sat before a camera and told the world they were recovering alcoholics. I worked for a news service at the time. Jorgenson invited me to a sneak preview of the first few shows of what would become the popular *It's Great to Be Alive* series. If the preview impressed me, he said, maybe I could put together a story for the state wire.

I covered politics, the state legislature mostly. A story on a bunch of do-gooders and their television series, I could do without. Even so, as a political reporter, I'd learned early in the game to make as many contacts in as many different social, business, economic and philosophical camps as I could. A guy never knew who might be helpful in chasing the next big story.

I'd heard about Jorgenson, of course. He'd been a big shot in state government in the 1960s, and an aggressive businessman and investor all over Pierre, the capital city. Somewhere along the line, he'd

run into some kind of trouble, and I'd heard he'd gotten religion. He'd sworn off the booze and started a treatment center. He traveled all over the state, all over the country, for that matter, talking about alcoholism and drug addiction.

Fanatics and true believers didn't do much for me, and the last thing I needed was to spend time with a guy who wanted to talk about not drinking. Still, Jorgenson knew all the movers and shakers in South Dakota. That made him potentially a valuable contact in a business that was all about contacts.

I agreed to view a couple of the shows and talk with Jorgenson a bit. We set the appointment at his office at River Park. He said he'd have sandwiches and coffee and he'd have me in and out of the place in no more than an hour.

Now, I drank pretty regularly at that time in my life. The nature of my job required it. At least, that's what I told myself—and my wife—on those evenings when I'd stumble into the house while she was washing the dishes from a supper I'd missed. A reporter learned a lot in the bars. Tongues loosened with each round of drinks. Secrets spilled out like a double shot of vodka. I couldn't do my job if I didn't hang around with the happy-hour crowd once in a while.

She'd already begun suggesting I had a drinking problem. I knew better.

I got rave reviews from my bosses about my work, after all. The daily newspaper editors who used my stories loved me. At 32, I could drink beer late into the night and still be at work before 8 a.m., ready to tackle the toughest assignment. I made good money, got promotions and commendations. That wasn't the performance of a person with a drinking problem.

Had I known then what I learned in later years, I could have ticked off a dozen danger signals.

I drank for all the wrong reasons, for one thing. Actually, I drank for only one reason, to get high. I drank to get rid of feelings. That's the way it had been from my first drink. I didn't drink in high school. I started on graduation night, splitting a six-pack of beer with two of my best friends. The first drink, although I didn't like the taste of the

beer, made me feel better than good. I felt wonderful. I felt important. I felt like a whole different person, not the shy goody-goody who never did anything wrong or made anybody angry.

From that first drink of beer on that warm June evening in 1962, I drank to recapture that feeling.

I drank to excess often. Throughout college my drinking increased and my grades slipped, slowly at first, then like an avalanche. I graduated from high school as class valedictorian. By the time I finished college, my grade point was barely a C-plus. In my last semester at college my transcript showed eight credit hours of D work, barely passing my major course of study, journalism. I blamed it on an instructor who had it in for me. I should have blamed it on the beer and whiskey I drank almost daily at the parties I chose over studying.

For years, I clutched stubbornly to the belief that a person couldn't have a drinking problem unless he'd had trouble with the law. By trouble with the law, I meant a drunken driving conviction, I guess. Only much later did I connect drinking with a college incident in which I was arrested with four other guys for stealing a dozen Christmas trees. We paid fines to the city and earned a year on social probation from the college. Never once did it occur to me that we probably wouldn't have even thought about taking those trees if we hadn't been sitting around the apartment that Friday night drinking beer after beer and daring each other to do something wild.

Embarrassing as the incident was, I blamed it on the typical hijinks a college kid will pull off, not on the drinking that preceded the stupid act of petty larceny. I wasn't alone. My folks, the Dean of Men, the town cop, the magistrate, all of them suggested this kind of prank ought to be stopped. None of them suggested I ought to think about not drinking.

After college, I married and got a newspaper job. We soon had a baby, and even though we both had been working, money was tight. We made friends with a couple in the same condition. Our socializing consisted of popcorn and iced tea, not nights on the town and booze.

Because I didn't drink often for a few years, I used that period later to prove to myself that I didn't need to drink. Much later, after I

learned more about alcoholism, I could see that, even during my “dry” periods, drinking remained far too important to me. Whenever I’d get a bonus, whenever we’d have something to celebrate, I’d scrape together enough money for a case of beer or a fifth of inexpensive bourbon.

Drinking dominated my thoughts, whether I actually drank or not.

By the time I reached River Park in 1976, I was drinking often and a lot. I wouldn’t have admitted I was an alcoholic, though, not for anything. Not even after I sat with Jorgenson and listened to part of his drinking history. Not even after I watched the preview tapes of his television program and heard actors Garry Moore and Dick Van Dyke call themselves recovering alcoholics and describe drinking patterns not so different from my own.

I left River Park that day thinking what a good place it was “for the sort of folks who need that kind of help.” I left believing I still controlled my drinking, although to this day I can remember how a sudden fear gripped me as I walked down the hallway toward the door to the parking lot.

It hit me so hard I could hardly keep walking. I managed to get to my car, though, and I sat for long minutes by myself, breathing hard, trying to make my hand reach to put the key in the ignition.

I drank for a couple of years after that, but I never again drank with any enjoyment. It was as if I’d seen myself for what I’d become and all that remained was to admit it.

The admitting took a while, and my family suffered mightily from my irrational moods and behavior during that time.

The news service assigned me to cover the national Democratic nominating convention in New York City in the summer of 1976. It was the nation’s bicentennial. Tall sailing ships from all over the world filled New York Harbor, Jimmy Carter supporters filled the streets of Manhattan. It was a marvelous time to be alive and celebrating. I’d never been to New York City. Friends had given me lists of all the things to see and do. I spent every free moment in bars.

On the convention’s final day, I went to lunch with another news service staffer at a cheap beer and burger joint just off Rockefeller Plaza. We drank until mid-afternoon. I returned to my hotel room to

change, passed out on the bed and woke up at mid-evening, barely in time to rush to Madison Square Garden for a couple of half-baked interviews and back to the news service office to file one of the poorest stories I'd done in a long while.

That New York City trip seemed to unleash something inside me. Until then, while I'd been a frequent and heavy drinker, I'd managed some control, generally getting to assignments on time and writing fairly concise, professional stories. After my convention trip, I seemed unable to get the control I once had. Getting to work each day became a struggle. Focusing on what people were saying as I interviewed them became a nightmare. Writing a clear, complete news story without errors became all but impossible.

All these things happened gradually, but by the middle of 1977, I knew I had a drinking problem. I told my wife I would quit. If I can't handle it alone, I said, I promise I'll ask somebody for help. I didn't intend to ever do that. I wasn't about to let anyone besides my wife know I feared I was an alcoholic. I could stop drinking, but I couldn't be an alcoholic.

I had the same misconceptions about "that kind of person" that most people did in those days. I knew alcoholics were weak-willed. I knew they had trouble with the law and couldn't hold a job and didn't support their families. I knew my bosses with the wire service wouldn't let me work for them if I couldn't drink because of an alcohol problem. In the first flush of my decision to go on the wagon, I told my supervisor I had some liver trouble. Just to be on the safe side, I was supposed to stay away from the booze, I said.

I couldn't do it, of course. Few people can get sober and stay that way without some kind of help. I wasn't among that few. Within weeks of my tearful confession to my wife, I began to drink again, in secret this time.

I hid bottles around the house, kept one in the garage, another in the bottom drawer at the office. I had to hide my drinking from everyone. Now it wasn't just a case of trying to control how much and how often I drank. I drank every day. I just had to drink in secret.

Each day became a lie. I struggled to seem sober. I gulped down

breath mints and chewed gum constantly to mask the smell of liquor. I used eye drops to try to clear the redness that came back with each day's drinking. I withdrew from the family and from my friends. A person can't get trapped in an incoherent conversation if he doesn't talk to anyone.

The 1978 session of the South Dakota Legislature passed in a blur. I wrote story after story, filing them in a drunken haze and rushing frantically into the bureau the next morning to read what I'd written and see how many errors needed to be fixed.

I'd had my first drinking blackout in 1970, and it had become a source of great amusement at parties when I told of how I'd left the table at a bar downtown, headed for the restroom, and found myself in my garage after driving home and parking the car. I had a couple more of those incidents over the years. They were mildly alarming, but I could shrug them off with a shake of the head and a self-deprecating, "Boy, I must have tied one on last night."

By 1978, the blackouts were frequent and frightening. Two, three, four afternoons a week I experienced periods ranging from a few minutes to several hours in which I functioned without knowing it. I'd be in the bureau typing, and suddenly I'd find myself finishing an interview with a legislator or taking notes during a news conference with the governor. I feared I was losing my mind, and I fought with myself to control the memory lapses.

Other reporters knew something was wrong. They didn't know what, so they did what they could. They covered for my lapses, made excuses when I couldn't be found late in the afternoons, cobbled together notes and wrote stories about meetings I'd missed.

After the 1978 session, I knew I needed more help than I could give myself. I called a recovering alcoholic in a city four hours away. He said he could help. Within an hour, two men I knew from Pierre walked into my office and said they would take me to a meeting of people who shared my problem.

I felt betrayed. The friend from out of town wasn't supposed to tell anyone in Pierre. Even so, these two men seemed so happy to help; I agreed to go to a meeting. I went back a couple of times a

week for the next six months, but I kept on drinking. I wouldn't tell the others that. I couldn't be honest. I used to leave meetings and cry about how the program was failing me. It wasn't, of course. I was failing myself by not being honest. Even with my life falling apart all around me, I couldn't reveal my secret openly to another person.

Blackouts came daily. I quit my news service job, took a salary cut and went to work for a small newspaper in town. The news service didn't understand me, I told people. They were out to get me. Well, they didn't understand, that's true. I refused to let them know what was happening. Instead, I took my secret and my bottle of cheap vodka, and I ran.

One afternoon as I slumped in a chair at home, my wife told me she didn't want me around. I was no good to the children, no good to her and no good to myself. She said I could keep living in the same house, but she and the three children would plan their lives without me. They couldn't count on me for anything, and they deserved some degree of normality in their lives.

I could drink or not drink, she said. If I decided not to drink, she'd do anything she could to help me. If I decided to continue drinking, she'd do anything she had to to help herself.

When she walked out of the room, I was completely alone. Never in my life had I felt so abandoned. I cried, told myself that all was lost. I sank into a black pit of self-pity, convinced I'd die alone, drunk and unloved. In my immature drunkenness, I wept for the lost promise of the child of Marie and Henry Woster, the valedictorian of the class of 1962. I was lost and pitiful.

The next day, although I'd gotten out of bed vowing not to drink, I stopped at the municipal liquor store on the way to work. I bought a quart of the cheapest vodka on the shelf and began to drink it by the coffee cupful as soon as I got to my office. Around noon I staggered to my pickup to drive across the Missouri River Bridge for a photo assignment in Fort Pierre.

That day was Oct. 12, 1978. In all the years since, I've been unable to remember what happened and unable to find anyone who saw me and who could help reconstruct my movements. I only know that I

was crossing the bridge one moment and sitting at the admissions desk at River Park the next.

Several hours had passed somehow. Glenn Jorgenson's sister, Nancy Tipton, worked at the center then. She told me later that she saw me stumbling down the hallway toward her desk and that I was begging for someone to help me. Apparently, during what had become my daily blackout, I'd driven to River Park, parked my pickup somewhere out in the park and asked to be checked in for alcohol treatment.

This was a Thursday. The paper I edited came out Friday, and I had done almost nothing to get stories written and set in type. If I stayed in River Park through the weekend, I'd avoid the problem of explaining why the paper hadn't been done and I'd have enough time to think up a story that would get me back into the office and back into the good graces of my family.

I agreed to stay in River Park that first night only because I had no other place to go and no one else who wanted me. It looked like a terrific place to hide out for a day or two.

I fell into bed that night exhausted, still half-drunk but fully intending to get up the following morning and make up a wonderful story that would let me walk out the front door.

When I woke up that first morning in the treatment center, I didn't have an urge to take a drink. Until that morning, every day for the past two or three years had brought an overpowering need to have a drink. Some mornings I'd be hung over, and some mornings I'd be sick, vomiting up dried blood from a stomach being eaten raw by alcohol. But always I'd burn with the desire for a drink.

That morning in River Park I was thirsty, my head hurt, my body ached and my stomach churned around. I didn't know if I could stand up, I couldn't keep my hands from shaking, and I wondered what would become of me in all the relationships I'd destroyed over the years. But I didn't want to drink alcohol. The obsession or compulsion or craving that had controlled my waking life for so long had disappeared.

That's why I say God must have done it. I never intended to go to treatment, but in a blackout I got there. I never intended to stay, but my need for alcohol left me even as I prepared to plot a way out of

this mess. I didn't do that. It simply happened to me.

Waking up and not needing a drink, I felt the first, faint stirring of hope I'd had in such a long while. Maybe, I thought, if I stay here a while, listen to what's going on and try to absorb the program, maybe I can stop drinking. It's worked for other people. Perhaps it can work for me.

It did. I never drank again, and my 30 days in River Park started me on a path of sobriety that has been more rewarding than I could have imagined. I found a group of people just like me, alcoholics trying to learn to live without booze, pills or street drugs.

I learned that an alcoholic is an alcoholic. The retired mail carrier that drank whiskey had many of the same issues as the 17-year-old ranch girl who smoked marijuana and drank beer or the 30-year-old construction worker who swilled tap beer and injected heroin. Each of them had to learn to face life without chemicals. So did I.

Few encounters were easy. I felt a tremendous anxiety the first time I met Jorgenson after I'd stumbled into River Park. After all, I hadn't written the stories on his television series. I'd ignored a couple of other invitations to visit and here I was an alcoholic, just like the people he worked around every day. I thought he might have a snide remark or two when he saw me, but he simply smiled, shook my hand and said, "I'm glad you got here. It's a good place to be."

It was a good place to be. It saved my life.

Some years after I went through treatment, River Park closed its Pierre center. A lot of alcoholics who first found hope there mourned the passing of the unassuming treatment center by the river. I wrote a column for the Pierre newspaper, (the *Daily Capital Journal* at that time), and I tried to capture some of what River Park in Pierre meant to those of us who found sobriety there. Here's what I wrote:

It's empty now, quiet and gray-shadowed as a crypt in a horror movie. But nothing is frightening here, nothing threatening.

It's only empty.

An irregular square of light squeezes through the glass at the end of the narrow hall and drops noiselessly to the thick carpet.

Bedrooms line each side of the concrete-block hallway like cadets ready for inspection, but a few doors gape open like missing teeth in an old hobo's grin.

The emptiness is so real that you try not to exhale, conscious of each breath scraping like a rasp across a piece of oak. The stillness hugs the hallway like thick fog on the main street of a ghost town, or the remembered devotion in the back pew of a church on a moonless night.

This is a wing of the old convent between St. Mary's Hospital and Maryhouse nursing home. For 14 years, until last Saturday, it was River Park, temporary home and lasting hope for thousands of misery-laden people hooked on alcohol or other drugs.

Now, it's only empty.

Now, if you stand in the murky shadows long enough, it is like a ghost town or an empty church. Gradually, you begin to hear whispering echoes of 14 years worth of spirits.

Faintly at first, but distinctly, the sounds of the place spread through the hall, scattering the shadows.

There's laughter here, full and free. It's a bright and clean sound, because these people needed each other and learned quickly to laugh at themselves and with their fellow clients.

There are voices, soft or loud, hesitant and stammering, direct and certain.

Many come from the lecture room, where those who had already taken the first steps in the process of recovery from a common illness shared their experience, strength and hope with those just beginning the journey. Other voices, too, can be traced to small groups of clients, two here, three there, quietly sharing failings and fears and starting to realize that, with each other's help, they just might make it.

There's the sound of pages being turned in a search for answers, and the scurrying sound of pens filling notebook pages with the suffering of the past and the promise of better times.

There is crying. The controlled moan of a girl who, although barely 17, despairs of ever feeling good again. The heart-stop-

ping sobs of a man who has hurt the ones he loves the most too many times to count. The chest-shaking, soundless cry of one who has finally forgiven herself, of another who at last understands that he isn't alone.

And always, there is the chorus of thousands of voices saying, "Yes, I felt just that way, too. Yes, I understand exactly what you feel."

River Park has moved inpatient treatment to Rapid City and Sioux Falls. It has outreach centers scattered in many other cities.

But for thousands, River Park will forever be what they hear in the faint echoes in these narrow, gray-shadowed hallways.

* * *

This book was written after I'd had many in-depth conversations with Glenn Jorgenson to capture his thoughts and reflections on the inspiration for River Park. I also reviewed nearly the entire collection of interviews Glenn did for the *It's Great to Be Alive* television series.

River Park helped me at a time when I believed nothing and no one could. Jorgenson and his staff of counselors and nurses made me realize I was capable of a normal, alcohol-free life. I left treatment knowing that I owed the place and the people more than I could ever repay. I tried in small ways, going to the center once a month to tell my story to the new clients, stopping by from time to time to try to help still-shaky drunks believe that their stay would be worthwhile, even returning each Saturday evening for years to join the guitar players for the sing-along.

None of those things balanced the books. Perhaps helping to tell the story of this amazing place and the people who made it so will put one more payment back for all I took from it. I'd like to think so.

—Terry Woster

GLENN'S JOURNEY

GLENN JORGENSEN STOOD AT the edge of the road at the crest of Minnesota hill and looked across the town of Sioux Falls. He raised his right thumb to indicate he was hoping to catch a ride out of town—and as far as a motorist would take him toward the West Coast. His left hand clutched a suitcase bursting with dreams.

The hilltop offered a view of a community bustling with post-war activity. Jorgenson couldn't see that, though. He'd had his fill of Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

His future, he believed, lay far to the west, out in California. He'd heard amazing stories of Los Angeles, San Jose, and San Francisco. They were the names of cities that made up the heart of the garden spot of the United States. California was a magical place, a place the Great Depression had missed, a place that wasn't bothered with the sacrifices being asked of a war-weary nation in the wake of the surrenders of Japan and Germany. A fellow could go out to California and be a big shot in no time. And boy, wouldn't that be a change from dreary little South Dakota?

Oh, sure, Glenn reflected as he stood by the road waiting for a

ride, he'd had some good times in South Dakota, especially in Sioux Falls during a summer of work for a doctor. He'd seen some amazing people, too—the wealthy people who golfed and played tennis and feasted and partied, who spent money on clothes and cars and food and liquor as if they'd never heard of the Great Depression.

How did they manage that? Back home in sleepy Hayti, South Dakota, everyone had been touched by the dust storms and grasshoppers, the failed crops and failed banks.

And before the farmers and shop owners of Hamlin County could even start to catch up as the depression lifted, the war came. Hayti folks were as patriotic as anyone, and when President Roosevelt asked the country to sacrifice, Jorgenson's hometown responded. They grew victory gardens, spent what little money they had for war bonds, and carefully rationed gasoline and meat and tires. They did without, all of them, and for a youngster growing up with a head full of big dreams, a little farming town that's doing without looks pretty dreary.

Glenn's father, Lloyd Jorgenson, held one of the important positions in Hayti—county auditor. That meant an impressive office in the stately old county courthouse. It meant—as long as the voters didn't turn on him—a steady, if meager, salary and a check to stretch from one payday to the next. It also meant connections with political people in other parts of the state.

When Glenn was 13, those connections paid off. Glenn landed a job as a yard boy for a Sioux Falls doctor. The doctor had a cabin near Hayti, where he and some of his friends came hunting. Glenn ran errands for them, then watched as the hunters prepared their meals and cleaned their game. As they cleaned and cooked, the men talked about hunting and business deals and money. They'd pause now and then to take man-sized gulps of whiskey from tall cocktail glasses, and they'd wipe their mouths and smack their lips appreciatively as the liquor went down their throats.

When the doctor offered to take Glenn in for the next summer, the Jorgensen's could hardly say no. Money was scarce in Hayti and on the surrounding farms. If Glenn could make a few dollars in Sioux

Falls and get room and board besides, it would lift a tremendous load from his parents' shoulders.

Glenn didn't like the idea of spending the summer away from his friends and family. In fact, the thought of being that far away for that long had him just plain scared. Not that he'd let anyone know that. Especially his father. Norwegian blood coursed through the Jorgenson family's veins, and the Norwegians had settled much of the harsh and unforgiving prairie of Hamlin County. They didn't complain. They did their duty.

So Glenn entered a new world that summer of his 13th year. It was a world of affluence and influence, populated by men and women who knew that living well required money and enjoying the good life required liquor. When the boy from the small town landed a job caddy-ing at the Minnehaha Country Club, he got a glimpse of the power and moneyed elite of South Dakota. He liked what he saw, and he promised himself that someday, he'd live like that.

The Norwegian work ethic never deserted him, though. Besides mowing and raking and running errands for the doctor, and carrying heavy golf bags for the country-club set, Glenn landed a job downtown in Sioux Falls at a theater owned by Joe Floyd. Floyd also created and developed the Midcontinent Broadcasting Company. His company's flagship property, KELO-TV, grew into perhaps the most powerful instrument of mass communication in the state.

Glenn Jorgenson couldn't know it at the time, but his association with Floyd and KELO-TV would be a key to the life he'd live much, much later. For now, the biggest thing in Glenn's life was finding a way to have the good things. He'd never seen the kinds of social outings that were so common in Sioux Falls. Society did a lot of partying. And partying meant social drinking, a phrase that struck Glenn as just the right sort of activity for people who were just a little bit better than the average shop keeper back in Hayti.

Glenn knew all about drinking. He'd learned at an early age that people who drank too much were weak and worthy only of pity. He'd heard the phrase "town drunk," pronounced with a disgusted tone. He'd seen a few of the local men stumble as they left the main street



Glenn Jorgenson at one of his first jobs, popping popcorn at a theater in Hayti.

tavern, and he'd heard talk between his parents about this person or that who drank to excess. It was a sinful thing to do.

Glenn surely had felt shame and guilt that time his 12-year-old pal had swiped some liquor from his parents and the two of them experimented with alcohol. Glenn wound up passing out on the courthouse lawn. When he awoke, he felt not only shame for his weakness and guilt for his sinfulness but fear at the thought that someone could have come along and found him. That's what comes of drinking, the 12-year-old Glenn told himself. And yet, why did he feel so good after that first sip or two?

And what about the hunters at the doctor's cabin by the lake? They all drank sometimes. The brown liquid was as much a part of the hunt as the Purdy shotguns and orange game pouches. Yet these were decent, hardworking and highly successful men. They certainly didn't appear ashamed of taking a cocktail now and then. Why should it be all right for them and not for Glenn, who planned to mix with their like someday?

And, what of the social set in Sioux Falls? Drinking made the parties. Glenn had seen that for himself. These bright, influential and

successful men and women raised champagne glasses and sipped martinis. As the night grew longer, the talk grew louder, the laughter easier and the friendships more intense. How could that be wrong?

Ah, but that was social drinking. And among people of good taste and refinement, social drinking happened a lot. If the folks back home in Hayti didn't understand that, well, Glenn Jorgenson didn't plan to spend his whole life in that little farm town, not by a long shot.

He'd seen enough to know that his place was a lot higher than a county seat in small-town South Dakota. That might be enough for his father, but Glenn wanted more than that. He wasn't about to scrape for a few dollars a week in a dusty old town. He had more ambition than that. And more talent, too. He had dreams and he was going places—big places.

Many of the folks of Hayti expected the same great things from young Glenn that he himself did. Wasn't he always in the library reading one book after another? And wasn't he one of the best athletes Hamlin County had turned out in a long while? In a town where high school basketball was king, Glenn had developed his skills well enough to play on the varsity team for the Hayti Redbirds as early as eighth grade. Not many kids did that, did they?

Glenn knew he was a pretty darned good basketball player. He suspected, too, that he was probably a lot smarter than the average person in Hayti. Sometimes, though, he wished other people wouldn't think so. Sometimes he wasn't sure if he was as talented as those people said or as intelligent, either. They expected so much from him. It was one thing to have big dreams for yourself, but what if you weren't good enough to meet the town's expectations?

Glenn sometimes wondered if there was something wrong inside him when he thought that way. I know I'm way better than the average person in Hayti, so why do I have these doubts? It isn't fair for people to expect so much from me. It's none of their business. But, boy, would they all be proud of me if I really became famous or rich. But what if I can't do it? What if I'm just a phony? How could I ever face these people again?

Quite by accident, Glenn found an answer to that question. Liquor.

Not so long after his humiliating experience of passing out on the courthouse lawn, Glenn had a chance to drink again. He took more care this time, recognizing alcohol as a powerful force and treating it with the respect any powerful force deserves. In return, it seemed, alcohol treated Glenn with respect. It rewarded his cautious approach. After just one or two drinks, his doubts were gone. Another drink or two, and all the big dreams came back, more clearly than he'd ever seen them before.

Oh, my goodness, yes. I am meant to do great things, he thought. I won't let these people down. I'm respected, and well liked. The girls in school think I'm pretty good looking, and they're right. The adults see how special I am, too. My name is in the sport pages all the time. It's just false modesty to sit around worrying about whether I'll be successful. Of course I will be. I'll go out in the world and become an important man. I know I will.

If it took a few drinks of liquor every now and then to keep the old spirit up, why, what was wrong with that? The other kids were drinking some, too. In fact, it was like being part of a club or something. It was a lot like being in the country club in Sioux Falls. Of course a person had to watch how much he drank, sure. But, after that time he'd drunk so much he'd passed out in public, who'd be stupid enough to let himself get out of control with liquor like that again? Glenn knew he was smart, and smart people could control their liquor.

That didn't mean not drinking. In fact, one of the things Glenn had learned by hanging around the social set was that drinking a lot but not letting it affect you was an accomplishment people admired greatly.

"Boy, that guy really knows how to hold his liquor," was the highest praise the smart set could bestow. Glenn had heard people say that time and again. The experience taught Glenn two important lessons, lessons he'd cling to for much of his early adult life.

First, having the ability to be a social drinker was a major asset, as long as you were always able to keep your senses, meet your commitments and do the job expected of you. The only real shame in drinking was to be so weak that you couldn't get to work the next day and give your boss a full day's labor.

Second, not drinking wasn't the good thing he'd sometimes been led to believe as a young boy. People in the social and business world looked at the teetotaler as a little odd.

The answer was to learn to drink when the occasion demanded and to keep a tight rein on how much you drank—to be known as one of those guys “who can really hold his liquor.” Glenn saw quickly that he must become that kind of man. And he knew he could do it, too. He could do anything he set his mind to doing.

Becoming successful was one thing he'd set his mind to. About the only thing as important as success in Glenn's life during his school days was winning the affections of a dark-haired slip of a farm girl named Phyllis. She was younger, just a freshman when Glenn was in his final year of high school. But she had a streak of common sense far beyond her years, and she was just about the nicest person he'd ever met. And she sure was pretty.

Phyllis wasn't the first woman who'd caught Glenn's attention. By the time he was a senior, he'd become something of a good-time Charlie—going with classmates to dance halls and saloons in nearby towns. Sometimes the guys would run into bar girls. They were usually older women, and a guy could take one look at them and just know they'd experienced a whole lot more than any high school boy had ever imagined. Still, they were fun to joke around with, have a few drinks with, and nobody was thinking of taking one of them home to meet the folks and start making wedding plans.

Once in a while—in spite of his best intentions—Glenn went on one of these party nights and drank way too much. It didn't happen every time, but it happened more than Glenn would have liked it to. Once, he passed out in the back seat of a car. It was only 26 degrees, and when he awoke, he told himself in alarm, I could have frozen to death.

That incident reminded him of his earlier resolve to be one of those guys who can really hold his liquor. He made a new resolution to be even more careful next time. And he was, too. The next time, the time after that, and maybe a third time still. Sooner or later, though, he did it again—drinking himself into a stupor and waking up wondering where he was, how he got there, how he'd get himself

out of this one without humiliating himself or his family.

That period of Glenn's life was a good time for learning excuses. If a person couldn't always keep his promise to drink in a controlled, social way, there must be a reason. One night it was because he drank some of his friends' vodka after polishing off his own pint of whiskey. Everyone knows you don't mix your liquors. Another time it was because the liquor was so cheap. Everyone knows you can have strange reactions to those off-brands of booze. The good-quality alcohol, measured by the price on the tag that hangs around the neck of the bottle, isn't so damaging to a person's system. It doesn't leave you with a hangover, either, he told himself, the way some of these cheap whiskeys can.

Late in his high school days, Glenn began to experience excruciating headaches. They were almost blinding in their severity, and they frightened him terribly. He came to realize that he could sense when one of the attacks was coming on, but he was helpless to stop them and almost unable to withstand the fierce pain. Some days, when one of the more violent of the attacks was upon him, it was all he could do to lie on his bed in a darkened room, pressing a cool cloth to his forehead and pleading with God to make the pain go away. When the spell passed, he was left weak and shaken. He began to search for ways to dull the pain.

The headaches and the drinking binges were both things Glenn sometimes feared he couldn't control as he neared the end of his high school years. His Norwegian parents brought him up to understand that life isn't always easy. Complaining only wasted time and energy, and there was always someone else worse off than you were. Glenn knew that while his parents would sympathize with his suffering, there wasn't anything they could do for him.

And he dared not speak about his occasional binges of out-of-control drinking, although he worried sometimes that he hadn't matured enough to control that sort of thing as well as he knew he'd need to do when he became a successful lawyer or businessman or politician. Had he ever decided to talk to his parents about drinking, neither of them would have understood how he could allow himself to get in such condition. So he kept it all inside, fighting off the pain

and coping with the fear by thoughts of Phyllis and the life together they'd have—once he'd gotten college out of the way in California and she'd finished high school.

* * *

As he tossed his suitcase into the trunk of the first car that stopped, Glenn took one last look from the top of Minnesota hill. Nope, not much here he'd miss. Only Phyllis, and he'd be back soon enough to take her west and begin a real life, just as soon as he'd made a success of himself.

The local newspaper editor made note of him leaving town.

THE HERALD ENTERPRISE
EDITOR: CAP NOHNER

June 10, 1948

That school was really over and that there wouldn't be any more Bayseed column was driven home the other morning when the editor watched the Bayseed's conductor, Glenn Jorgenson trudge down the road out of town shortly after 6 O'clock one morning, small suitcase in hand, enroute to California where he will arrange to continue his schooling. Just another young fellow starting out in life on his own as have thousands before him. The editor's was the last familiar face Glenn saw as he left the old home town. He may recall this for a long time to come. Such trivial incidents frequently stick a long time in a young fellow's mind until he adjusts himself to the new work about him.

So much for big dreams.

California turned out to be a place of loneliness, of disillusionment, of often solitary drinking, blinding headaches and paralyzing self-doubts. Glenn struggled in college, nagged by a feeling that his South Dakota schooling had ill-prepared him for California's system of higher education. The loneliness dogged him. He drank with some kids at school from time to time, but he never really felt like he had any friends. When he lost a job that had helped pay his college costs, he knew it was time to go home. At least in Hayti he had family who cared about him and knew how smart he was. And he had Phyllis, who treated him as if he were a white knight.

It seemed he'd been in California an eternity, but when the bus pulled into the Sioux Falls station, it had only been a matter of months. Coming home like this embarrassed him—no job, no money, and no big success. He'd had to borrow the money for the bus ticket back to South Dakota.

His old pool-hall buddies welcomed him home, though. And Phyllis, she'd never be critical of a decision Glenn made. He was the man she intended to marry, after all.

Glenn quickly found a job at a grocery store. The work didn't challenge his intellect or showcase his special talents, but it was a beginning. He tried to enlist in the Navy, getting as far as Fargo, North Dakota, before a military doctor rejected him because of curvature of the spine. That shook his self-esteem. But he told himself it was the Navy's loss.

His uncle Shorty loaned him \$300—enough for nine months at General Beadle State Teacher's College, and with that certification, he taught fourth through eighth grades at a tiny school in Dempster, South Dakota. He liked teaching but the salary wouldn't support a family, and he was thinking seriously about marriage. When in 1951 Governor Sigurd Anderson offered him the opportunity to be assistant director of the new state department of old age and survivors insurance, his thoughts turned to action. He married his high-school sweetheart and moved to South Dakota's capital city to begin a life of happily ever after.



At age 21, Jorgenson became the assistant director of South Dakota's department of old age and survivors insurance. He was appointed by South Dakota Governor Sigurd Anderson.

An important man with a wife and a state administrator's job, Glenn found in Pierre the life he'd fantasized about since he was a young boy. He moved smoothly from the hard work of the day to the relaxing companionship of the happy hour, and he spent long, heady hours talking politics and planning Young Republican strategy with like-minded capital-city business and government leaders.

A rising star in the GOP, he left Phyllis for a weekend in Brookings, where General Dwight Eisenhower was speaking at a party function. He returned home tired, hung over from far too many drinks, but buoyed by the face-to-face meeting with Ike and bursting to tell Phyllis the story of her husband and the important things he'd been doing.

He walked into an empty house.

"What is this?" he fumed, suddenly hurt as if Phyllis had somehow conspired to put a damper on one of the biggest moments in his life. She can't even bother to be home when I need her? What about supper? I've had a long weekend, and I wanted to share all the excitement with her. Still in a foul temper when his sister walked in, Glenn yelled, "Where the hell is Phyllis?"

She was in the hospital, his sister told him. She'd had a miscarriage. The news stunned Glenn. He didn't know she was pregnant. Why wouldn't she tell him they were going to have a baby? Why didn't she call when she miscarried?

Phyllis didn't want him to be bothered, Glenn's sister told him. It was such an important weekend for him. Oh, did that unleash an attack of guilt. Glenn rushed to the hospital, wrapped his arms around his small wife, and promised over and over he'd never be gone again when she needed him. Children will come in time, he told her. Meanwhile, they'd just live for each other, he said. Happily ever after.

Living happily ever after wasn't easy, though, not when the job was boring, not when the boss took all the credit for Glenn's good ideas and relentless effort. He put up with it as long as he could, but finally Glenn went to Phyllis and suggested they move to California. Maybe it didn't work out for him when he tried it there on his own. They'd be there together this time, he told her. That would make all

the difference, for both of them.

The job market boomed on the West Coast, he said, and the pay scale couldn't be matched anywhere in the Midwest. They'd never forgive themselves if they didn't gamble a little this time.

Phyllis told Glenn she was content with her clerical job in a state agency. After he painted more mental pictures of streets of gold and trees laden with greenbacks, she agreed that California might be the best place to be—if it made Glenn happy.

California turned out to be almost an instant replay of Glenn's earlier visit; except that this time, while he had no luck finding a good job, Phyllis began working almost immediately. And just as quickly she seemed to settle into a life of working during the day and keeping a home going in the evenings and on weekends. For his part, Glenn gambled a little, bought drinks for prosperous-looking gentlemen in classy lounges and tried to stifle the mounting despair over his inability, once again, to be a success in California. The headaches came with increasing frequency and intensity, and he began to take shots of Demerol to control the pain.

Finally, he told Phyllis they should return to South Dakota. It hurt him deeply, he told her, to see her so unhappy and so far from her family. She readily agreed to pack up and return to the Midwest if that's what Glenn needed to make him happy. He assured her it was only her happiness that concerned him, and he knew South Dakota was the place she'd be happiest.

Fortune smiled on the Jorgensons when they returned to Pierre. Phyllis quickly found a job in a state agency. Glenn found a backer willing to loan him the money to buy a credit business. For a while after he returned from California, Glenn even managed to control his drinking, with occasional lapses to celebrate a special event or toast a friend's success. He worked hard, and the business prospered.

At home, things were prosperous, too. Glenn and Phyllis found a home in a quiet neighborhood of tall elm and hackberry trees. With the house came extra bedrooms, and the opportunity to fill one with a child. Phyllis became pregnant, and in due time Glenn found himself staring in awe at the most beautiful baby girl in the world.

The blessed event called for a celebration. While Phyllis recovered from childbirth in the hospital, Glenn went on the town with his best friend. He awoke from a wild, giddy night of drinking with a giant hangover and the resolve to straighten up again. Fatherhood brought new responsibility, and he promised himself he'd never do anything to hurt his newborn daughter.

He applied himself to his work, but in his free time, Glenn immersed himself in politics. He gravitated naturally to the strategy sessions, the happy-hour meetings that began after work and stretched, more and more often it seemed, through the supper hour. He and the gang he ran with backed a candidate for governor—a solid Republican, a sure bet in conservative South Dakota. Only two Democrats had been elected governor in state history, and one of them rode in on the Franklin Delano Roosevelt tide during the Depression years.

Although Phyllis became pregnant again, Glenn had to travel the campaign trail, a long, demanding grind that he told her would cement their successful future together when the candidate took office and divided the spoils of political victory. The campaign ended on election night with a gala victory celebration planned in the banquet room of a Pierre hotel.

The celebration became a wake for Glenn as the unthinkable happened—the Democrat won. Glenn hardly noticed. Sometime during the evening, as every new set of voter returns darkened the gloom of the candidate's staff and volunteers, Glenn had grabbed a bottle and adjourned to a private room in the hotel, drowning the bitterness of defeat with shot after shot of burning liquor.

He awoke sick, hung over and unable to recall whether his candidate had won the election. He returned home to find that he'd become a father again. While he'd been mourning the defeat of a candidate, Phyllis had been laboring to bring the couple's second daughter into the world.

Again, he promised himself he'd be better at home, better at work, better in every way. Again, the resolve lasted a while. Then again he began to drink more, stay out more, travel more. Phyllis became less understanding of his absences, his drinking, his need to always be

scheming and dreaming. She began scheduling activities for herself and the girls, activities they could count on with or without Glenn. His headaches came back, stronger and more frequent than ever. The headaches seemed to be worse when he drank, Phyllis told him. Perhaps he shouldn't drink?

Instead, Glenn began to worry that the headaches were a sign of some mental illness. He consulted counselors, psychiatrists, and doctors. Nothing helped, so he drank again, took more pills, begged for Demerol when the headaches became blinding. And through it all, he kept charging ahead, looking for business opportunities, buying a second credit bureau, investing in land, joining a friend to open a private club. Some of the business ventures succeeded, others failed miserably. But success or failure, they showed that Glenn Jorgenson was a man to be reckoned with, a visionary and a builder, the kind of person whose counsel would be valued by any leader.

And, eventually, a leader did want Glenn's advice and counsel. Six years had passed since the losing campaign of the sure-thing Republican. The upstart Democrat lost a re-election bid, and the GOP regained control of the governor's office. The new chief executive, Nils Boe, asked Glenn to join him as director of state personnel. A cabinet position, Glenn thought with smug satisfaction as he dialed his buddy to suggest a celebration of drinks.

This time, what seemed to be an unlimited opportunity turned out to be a sickening, downward spiral. While he succeeded in developing personnel policies and spearheading efforts to establish a retirement program for public employees, his personal life suffered. Important government managers need more than ever to be able to relax with a few drinks after work, to meet other important folks for drinks in the evening, to bring important people home to dinner on a whim and without warning Phyllis. Glenn threw himself into that routine with almost a vicious energy, working long days and drinking late into the nights.

Sometimes, usually when he was the most hung over and washed out, Glenn looked at his life and saw nothing but an abyss. His world seemed to have so little meaning. His family—for they had two

daughters by now, daughters who loved their daddy and who could break his heart with a smile or a tear—was everything to him, yet he stayed out late, missed school events and ballet recitals and even church programs. He came home drunk, slurring his words and smelling of whiskey and cigarettes. The hurt expression on Phyllis's face cut him so deeply that he prayed for her to be angry when he'd come in late, full of lies and wild excuses. Her anger he could counter with anger of his own. Her sadness and pain, those he couldn't bear.

In those times, Glenn couldn't completely hide the gnawing voice inside that whispered: "You aren't normal. Are you crazy? Is it the liquor? Maybe you have a drinking problem."

When he couldn't silence the voice, he'd groan inwardly and hug himself as if to keep his soul from flying out of his body. This can't go on, he'd moan.

"I am not this kind of person—I'm a good man," he'd cry to the heavens, as if the God of his childhood would hear him, reach down and make everything all right again.

In his despair, he turned even more frequently to drink, and to pills, for his headaches were becoming more frequent and more completely unbearable. He refused to look on the pills as drugs. These were prescription medicines, given him by licensed and trained pharmacists—never mind that as he took and required more and more of the pills, he began to see more and more doctors in different towns as he traveled.

Liquor, of course, he could get. Nothing easier. Every tavern and lounge and supper club and after-hours spot in the state sold booze. Glenn came to know bartenders and waitresses in establishments from Sioux Falls to Rapid City, and they came to know him. The bars and country club lounges outside of Pierre became sanctuaries, away from the prying eyes and wagging tongues of the hometown folks. In the big city, a well-spoken man with an expensive suit and a wallet full of cash merited respect. Glenn sought out excuses to travel.

But he couldn't continue drinking forever, though he often wished he could. He recalled a scene from an old Ed Sullivan variety show on television, the act in which a man tries to keep dozens of

dinner plates spinning on slender poles. Glenn often felt like that man, rushing from pole to pole, frantically trying to add just a little more motion to the plate without sending it crashing to the ground. No one could keep so many plates in the air for so long. It was just too hard.

His work slipped, and he drank. Phyllis cried softly, and he drank. The girls looked at him sadly when he returned home from the bar too late to go to the school play. And he drank.

The job disappeared. He found another. He lost that one, and his closest friend gave him a chance to manage a bar and motel. The very first night, he closed up the bar with a group of old drinking buddies. Within days, he found himself peering with bloodshot eyes into the tortured face of his best friend in all the world and struggling to comprehend the words he was hearing:

“Sorry, Glenn, but it just isn’t going to work out. We have to let you go.”

Glenn snatched a bottle of whiskey from the shelf behind the bar and fled unsteadily to a vacant room in the motel. He drank himself into oblivion, regaining consciousness long enough to see Phyllis standing beside his rumpled bed.

“Glenn, I love you,” she said. “I would do anything to help you but there is nothing I can do. Either get help, or the girls and I are gone.”

The motel room door closed softly behind her. Glenn groped for his bottle. It was empty. He’d never been so alone. Betrayed by his closest friend, forgotten by his employer, unloved and unwanted by his family, forsaken by God.

“There’s nothing left,” he cried. “I’m finished.”

And thus began his recovery.

* * *

RESOURCES

CONSULT YOUR LOCAL TELEPHONE directory or look online to contact the following organizations. Programs and referrals are offered in many communities.

- Alcoholics Anonymous
- Al-Anon
- Alateen
- Narcotics Anonymous
- Gamblers Anonymous

...

The United States Department of Health and Human Services provides a listing of substance abuse treatment facilities on this website:

<http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/TreatmentLocator/faces/quickSearch.jspx>

...

More information about River Park and videos from the *It's Great To Be Alive* television series:

itsgreattobealivebook.com
riverparksd.com
facebook.com/itsgreattobealivebook

TERRY WOSTER grew up on a farm northeast of Reliance in Lyman County, South Dakota. He graduated from Chamberlain High School in 1962 and from South Dakota State University in 1966 with a degree in journalism. The Sioux Falls Argus Leader gave him his first fulltime newspaper job, staff photographer, in 1967. He wrote features and sports at the paper for two years and then took a job with the Associated Press in the wire service's Pierre bureau in 1969. After nine years with the AP, he took a job as managing editor for the Daily Capitol Journal and left that in 1987 to become Capitol reporter for the Argus Leader. He held that position for 22 years, until he retired in December of 2008. He currently works as public information officer for the South Dakota Department of Public Safety. He also freelances for the Mitchell Daily Republic and the Tri-State Neighbor. He married his high-school sweetheart, a registered nurse, Nancy Gust, in 1967. They raised three children and have five granddaughters.

GLENN JORGENSEN is the President of the River Park Foundation, an entity that provides education, training and information about alcoholism and chemical dependency and its effects on families. A native of Hayti, South Dakota, he taught school, owned and operated several businesses with his wife Phyllis, and worked in state government. In 1965, he was appointed South Dakota's Director of Employment by Governor Nils Boe. With Pierre businessmen Shanard Burke and Jack Parr, he and Phyllis established River Park's first treatment center for alcoholism and drug dependency in 1971. He was President and CEO of River Park until it merged with Parkside, a division of Lutheran General Health System, in 1988. The River Park treatment facilities were closed by Lutheran General in 1992. Jorgenson served on the South Dakota Commission on Alcoholism and the South Dakota Vocational Education Board of Directors. Jorgenson was inducted into the South Dakota Hall of Fame in 1996. He served on the Hall of Fame's Board of Directors from 2005 through 2011.

In addition to her work with River Park's facilities and programs, **PHYLLIS JORGENSEN** is an accomplished artist. The Jorgensons have two daughters, three grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.