

**Expect a Miracle:**

**A Story of Healing in an Alcoholic Family**

**An Oral History  
December 2003**

**Expect a Miracle:**

**A Story of Healing in an Alcoholic Family**

## **Cast of Characters**

**Sam** – 50 year old father, son, husband, and alcoholic. He has been married for 26 years, in recovery for almost 2. Sam has an extremely sensitive nature and has been described by friends as being “too soft for this world.” He has shown great courage by not only telling his own story, but by encouraging his family to tell theirs. It will not be an easy one to read. His involvement with this project is a leap of faith, and an act of love.

**Shirley** – Sam’s mother. Shirley was a young mother, only 19 when Sam was born, and divorced shortly thereafter. After marrying Jim they moved frequently, finally settling in Connecticut when Sam was 11 years old. The relocation effectively cut her off from her close-knit family which remains on the West Coast. Thoughtful by nature, Shirley has spent many hours considering what this experience may have meant to her life and the lives of her children.

**Jim** – Married Shirley when Sam was 5 years old. A high achiever and loyal employee, Jim enthusiastically moved his family frequently to accommodate his career aspirations. A successful business man, he is proud to have provided an upper middle class upbringing for his children, fulfilling the cultural expectation of the mid-twentieth century American man.

**Emma** –23 years old. Oldest daughter; she is bright, funny, and fiercely loyal to both family and friends. Of all the children, Emma held the most anger towards Sam which manifested itself in her withdrawal, both physically and emotionally, from him. She is open and accessible to others but by nature keeps her own pain private, often using humor to cover her memories and the deeper feelings they incur.

**Grace** – 19 years old. Middle child; she is private, sensitive, and observant. Grace has always had easy access to her emotions and was the most directly confrontational child in the family. Her heart is full and easily broken, particularly when someone she loves has been hurt. Her own sorrow remains close to the surface, which became excruciatingly evident as she painfully shared her stories.

**Jared** – 16 years old. Youngest child, only boy; he is artistic, sensitive, and loyal. Jared describes himself as “too young and self involved” to have been affected by the chaos of living with an alcoholic parent. He is much loved and protected by his older sisters which, though he may not yet recognize, is a great gift in his life. Loyalty to his father precludes him from articulating in detail the pain incurred by his own experiences yet the sorrow and confusion is there to be found, albeit between the lines.

“When you’re drunk all the time, the memories just roll together  
because it’s all the same.

The memories my family have are more specific than mine... “

--- Sam

*Sam has a complicated but loving relationship with his family. He was very close to his maternal grandparents with whom he lived as a small child, and he continued to visit as frequently as time and money allowed up until their deaths. His oldest daughter is named Emma after his grandmother. Sam did not know his biological father, Erling, until he was 30 years old. They became quite close and Sam was devastated by his death last year. He is grateful that Erling, an alcoholic in recovery for over 20 years, lived to see Sam achieve sobriety.*

**Sam:** Growing up I spent summers in Washington with my grandparents. There was no drinking at their house, but I had an aunt and uncle who were different – Ruby and Duke.

They were the closest relatives to me. They were part of the country club set; they had a pool. It was a romantic existence with the drinking and the barbecues. We only did that at their house, and my mother could let her hair down there. Back in Connecticut, the pattern in my family was my father would come home from work and that was cocktail hour. My mother would usually join him and as I got older, I became a part of that. I would join them. At that time I didn't feel as though I was different. In high school my drinking was social, but that changed in college. That was the first time I had inkling that I was different, that there was an issue there.

**Shirley:** The first time I was concerned about Sam's drinking was in college. It was the first time I really saw him drunk.

**Jim:** I first thought he may have a problem when he was in college. He lived in a house with 5 other guys. It was dirty and really a mess, bottles everywhere. How could you study in an environment like that? He had this car and every time we saw it there was another fender broken off, I assumed from drunk driving. He was missing classes because he couldn't manage it.

**Sam:** Being an alcoholic you have a sixth sense of others with that in common. I surrounded myself with people who, when others were done, didn't stop. It was more important for us to keep drinking. There were repercussions – attending classes became less important, relationships with women. It definitely wasn't just a social thing anymore. This is when I began to drink alone; this is when blackouts began for me.

**Shirley:** Sam's first summer home from college he worked at a fence company. I saw him drive away one morning and he was lighting a marijuana cigarette. He told me he and the guys were drinking beer at lunchtime. I asked him how he thought he could keep

a job behaving like that. Then he didn't come home any more in the summer so I didn't know what he was doing.

*After they married, Sam and his wife left Connecticut and moved to Central Vermont, later relocating to Hanover, New Hampshire. The red flags were everywhere, but it would be 24 years until Sam entered treatment.*

**Sam:** When I was first married and working, there was heavy drinking going on. I had moved on from college and found another social group. I had my excuses though – the people I was hanging out with were drinking too. I was with my boss, my co-workers... they were people I worked with and I felt I had to go out after work. There was a heavy culture of drinking at work. Going out at night was a typical thing. We'd pull over on the side of the road after work and stand around drinking beer. I kept a bottle in my desk and would often drink in my office with co-workers. We'd go to lunch, drink, and we'd come back drunk.

Then one of my co-workers stopped drinking and decided to turn me in to the CEO of the company. He reported my drinking on the job and I was called in to the corporate office in Boston. I was confronted by both the CEO and the President of the company and I lied, saying this man had something against me and was just trying to make trouble. After that I tried to control myself at meetings so it never seemed that I drank more than anyone else. It didn't always work.

I spent a night in the lock-up in Woburn, Massachusetts after returning drunk to a hotel. I was there for a business meeting and went out drinking with some people from the company. A cop saw me stumbling into the lobby and took me in. They took my belt and put me in the drunk tank. They let me out in the morning and I went back to the

hotel, put on a clean suit, and made it to the meeting on time. No one ever knew I had been picked up, that I had spent the night in jail.

**Shirley:** The first time I thought, “What is he thinking” was when my mother and my sister Ruby were visiting us in Connecticut. Sam arrived from work dressed in a suit and he was so drunk he could hardly sit on the couch. I was surprised because I knew how much he loved his grandmother and her visit was such a special occasion. I thought why would he do that? I didn’t talk to him about it though.

**Sam:** I had to prep myself for visits with my family. I had to numb myself in preparation for whatever would come up with them. You try to get yourself to a place where you don’t have to think; where stuff will roll off you.

**Shirley:** There always seemed to be an episode when our family was together. When his sister was getting married Sam arrived at our house separately from his family. He pulled into the driveway and was so drunk he literally fell out of the truck. Of course he was contrite the next day, but we didn’t talk about it.

When he would come to visit he did a lot of leaving. He’d go to the store or out to the car and when he came back he’d be different. I remember I did try to talk with him about it one time. I told him, “You have to stop this or you’re going to lose everything you have.” He said, “I’m fine,” and I couldn’t pin him down. I don’t know what else I could have done. I couldn’t have stopped it. I went to Al Anon and I did learn about letting go, but in the back of my mind I always wondered how much was my responsibility.

**Sam:** In rehab things came up about my family, my childhood. I went to four different grade schools before grade 6 and I always thought it helped me, that it was somehow

good for me and my social skills. I remember my mother saying how well I adapted to people, how I made friends easily. But I was a wreck the whole time. Looking back it was a terrifying experience - always being the new kid, leaving my grandparents. All these things came up in vivid, dramatic ways in therapy. My peers and my therapists would not brush off these experiences like I tried to do. They recognized that it wasn't normal. It wasn't foster care, but it was abnormal in its own way. I always thought I had your average all-American childhood, but it was far from that. As a whole person it's really about how your life experience affects your disease and how your disease affects your life experience. It's the whole person who needs to heal.

**Shirley:** The worst thing for me to deal with now is getting over guilt. When Sam was a little baby I felt like a mother, but when his father and I divorced and we moved in with my mother she took over and I just backed out of it. I wasn't ready to be a hands-on mother. My mother was always more like Sam's protector so I didn't have to be. I could live the single life. It wasn't until Jim and I got married that I got that maternal feeling. So I wonder about everything that happened to Sam ... his father not being around and not making an effort. If I hadn't married Jim and moved to Connecticut would his life have been different? It changed our lifestyle so much. It cut us off from family.

**Jim:** We would feel bad when he'd come down and there was always some sort of episode. I remember his behavior at my retirement party was embarrassing. Nancy spoke, Sally spoke, Stephen spoke, and when Sam spoke he was incomprehensible, just slurring his words and repeating himself. I've never replayed that tape and I've had it for 10 or 12 years. I don't want to hear that or see that ever again.

The pattern when he would visit was the same - he'd be here a few hours and then he'd be off to get cigarettes or something. We would only see each other about three times a year yet he would never say "Why don't you come along?" It used to make me feel bad. I didn't understand why he wouldn't ask me to come.

It got to the point where I would take the liquor from our little pantry and hide it in the basement when he was coming. I knew that if I had a bottle in there and he was down for the weekend, by Monday someone would have drunk from it. He would stay up late watching TV by himself, and I knew he would be sitting alone drinking our liquor.

**Shirley:** From then on it became very secretive when he was there. He would do that leaving thing and then we would watch him change over a period of several hours. We decided then that it would be better if we went to his house, thinking that it seemed less stressful. Then he began doing the same thing there.

**Jim:** Once we drove to New Hampshire and we had arrived early so we went into town. Sam's car was parked right outside of the Hanover Inn and he was just coming out. He was so surprised to see us. He got all flustered and acted confused. We figured he had been in the bar having a few drinks before he came home.

**Shirley:** The worst night was when we were visiting and he became confrontational with us. He had been going in and out to the garage all evening, and we knew he was drinking out there. I thought he had already been drinking even before we arrived because I could smell it when we came in. But it got very obvious that he was drunk as the night went on.

**Jim:** It has been a surprise to me all along how much drinking Sam was doing because no one ever found the evidence. You'd never witness him actually drinking. I remember being at his house and he had been going in and out to the garage all night. You could tell something was different when he would go out and come back in because he'd be slurring his words, or there would be something about his eyes. I thought he was taking pills. We finally said something about it and he turned on us and said, "Fuck you." Then he just stormed off. Sam was always a respectful son and I just couldn't believe it. His mother and I were shocked at his behavior.

*At one point, Sam announced he knew he had a problem with alcohol and that he believed himself to be an alcoholic. He told his wife, his parents, and each of his children. He made promises – to get treatment, to change his behavior, to stop drinking. It would be fifteen years before he actually took those steps.*

**Sam:** There were fights with my wife. My relationship was very important but it didn't stop my behavior. It wasn't going to slow me down. At that point my concern was not looking at myself, the focus was trying to keep the peace. I thought I could find a line where I could continue to drink on the one hand, while maintaining family peace on the other. I was in denial, trying to be my people pleasing / family pleasing self. I do remember standing in the kitchen promising to stop for a period of time just to prove I could do it. It was from then on that the hiding began. It was just a show - I wasn't doing it for me, I was doing it for my wife. I had no real intention. How many years did that go on – the lying, the hiding. I was only concerned with feeding my disease, really. For years I was hiding it, drinking all the time. When I went to AA meetings, when I did the outpatient program – I was still drinking. It was all a lie, just a show. I would drink on the way to meetings and on the way home. I would lie and go to a bar and not even go to

meetings. But I stayed in the marriage because I loved my family. This is how insidious the disease is. I couldn't imagine not living with my family and yet I knew I was in danger of losing them.

**Shirley:** I remember the first time he said, "I'm an alcoholic." He didn't seem serious; he didn't seem concerned about it. He kept saying he was dealing with it, and I was hopeful when he got involved in the outpatient program. You hear about alcoholics needing to hit bottom - I was always worried about where bottom might be. We worried about what would have happened if the marriage had ended. We felt it was coming closer and closer and that he didn't know what he was destroying. I don't know what he would have done if that had happened. It would have been so destructive to him.

**Sam:** The marriage wasn't very good but I felt I had to live with it; to just get by. The priority was the drinking. As time went on it was, "Get through this because it won't always be like this. I'm going to get better." Then the pity started. I began to blame my wife for our not having a good relationship, even though I was the one who had caused it. You begin to blame the person closest to you. "She's just going to get mad anyway; she doesn't love me anyway" – so you say, "The hell with it, I might as well drink." In your loneliness, you have to find reasons. "Why am I like this?" There had to be a reason for this behavior. "It must be you, you're the one who's doing this to me." The anger and the hurt between us... You just decide to live with the consequences.

**Grace:** The way that your parents feel about each other – they don't have to fight in front of you or kiss each other in front of you – you pick up on it. You just know. And with this disease, it's the pink elephant in the room. You're going to be conscious of it. We could hear them fighting. Dad would drive away really late at night and that wasn't

normal. I didn't know what they were fighting about. For a long time I never knew the extent of the anger, I thought it was normal fighting. I did grow up assuming that my parents would be divorced by the time we all graduated high school. I actually used to prepare myself for this. I believed that they were still together because of us, and by the time Jared graduated high school and my mother thought we were all independent she wouldn't put up with whatever it was she was putting up with. I could tell more from her than from him what was going on. I always believed that ultimate decision would be for her to leave him, not for him to leave her.

**Sam:** I would have done anything for my daughter. I really loved her that much. I was home alone on a Sunday morning taking care of her, my 10-month old daughter. I was playing with her on the living room floor drinking bourbon and water out of a red plastic cup. I got drunk and passed out on the floor. Whether or not she had been asleep when I did this, I don't know. I'm hoping at least that much was true. When I woke up her mother was holding her and you could tell she had been crying for awhile. Her face was all red and blotchy. She was just learning how to crawl and could only do it backwards. There was a fire going in the woodstove and she had backed herself up right next to it, which is where her mother found her. If her mother hadn't come home she would have been burned on the stove while I was passed out on the floor. But I still thought I was a good father. I believed she was the most important thing, but actually the most important thing was drinking.

**Grace:** My parents used us; they talked about each other behind their backs. I felt like I was being brainwashed. I think Jared was the biggest victim of Dad's and Emma was the biggest victim of my mother's. Emma and my mother had the kind of relationship where

it was “anti-Dad” and, “We can bond together and resent him,” and Jared and my father had “the only other guy in the family” kind of relationship. A lot of times we would be eating dinner and excluding Dad from our conversation. Jared would be very uncomfortable in those situations. He would make an effort to talk to Dad because he was always very conscious of Dad’s feelings. But there were times when I would like that too. I would feel so good when we would exclude him. It was kind of like, “Fuck you Dad, look at us. We can function without you. We don’t need you. We don’t need this.”

**Sam:** The family was another source of my pity. It was just too painful to think about what my kids thought of me – if I made them nervous or if I scared them. So I did a 180 in my mind and turned it on them. It was all about me. I felt estranged and even though I had caused it, I blamed them for how I felt. I was so lonely. I told them that I was an alcoholic, probably looking for sympathy. They all reacted differently. Emma was the one who retreated from me; she just kind of gave up on me for awhile. Grace was the sad one; she showed her emotions. She confronted me a few times. Emma left me but Grace challenged me with her anger and her sadness. Jared had a blind faith in me. I think he tried harder just to ignore it, ignore his own feelings, so he could support me. All affected. All affected a lot deeper than they say.

**Emma:** I remember him coming into my room one day and telling me he was an alcoholic. He was so nervous. I just thought he was a raging fool. I couldn’t stand how he would say stupid things and laugh nervously. And he was so socially awkward. The worst was when my friends would come over and he would come down four times just to say goodnight and other weird random stuff. I wasn’t even really embarrassed by it. I was so far removed from him that he couldn’t even embarrass me at that point.

Everything he did made my skin crawl. When he told me he was an alcoholic it wasn't like, "Oh, that's why he's such a moron." At that point I was so far gone, I could have cared less.

**Grace:** I guess he thought I'd reached a certain age or seen enough that he thought it was time for me to know – kind of like Santa Claus or something. It was my time to be taken into the room and told the truth. He sat down and I remember he cried and I cried. I didn't understand what it really meant. He prefaced it with something along the lines of, "You know I have erratic behavior. It's because there's a disease and your grandfather had it. It's an inherited disease and I struggle with it." He epitomized himself as a victim, like it was a death sentence. He cried and I wanted to console him but at the same time my head tried to work out what exactly was going on. Then there was a hug and that was it. It didn't mean that the drinking stopped. It made the burden even heavier in a way.

**Jared:** I didn't know Dad was drinking or that he was an alcoholic, I just thought he was annoying. I remember when I had friends over he would come downstairs to say goodnight about five times. For a long time I didn't know, I thought he was being weird. When I heard Dad was an alcoholic it wasn't upsetting, it was more like, "Oh, that's why he does that."

**Emma:** I didn't really understand the disease. I thought that when he said he was an alcoholic that he would just do something about it and not drink. But he was always back and forth. I had no concept of addiction. I just thought it was annoying. I thought, "Get over it already. Get your priorities straight. If you give a shit about anyone in this family

then just don't do it." It wasn't the fact that he *didn't* or *couldn't*, I thought it was more that he *wouldn't*.

**Grace:** If my mother was out of town I'd definitely not have friends over. That was first and foremost. There was just no way. There were times I'd be sitting with friends and he'd come in and pull me out. He'd ask me why I was being so cold, why I was being so dismissive. All I could think of was, "What are my friends thinking?" I'd just say, "I don't want to be around you right now."

I remember specifically a time when we were alone, my mother was gone, and Dad shut himself in the bedroom. Jared came to my room and he was really upset. He was crying because he had tried to talk to Dad who was really out of it. Dad was just sitting in his room with candles burning. I came in and tried to talk to him, but I didn't know how I was going to fix it. I don't really know what I was thinking, I just knew that Jared was upset and I had to do something.

**Jared:** I can't blame him for drinking in high school and college. Lots of people do and they don't have a problem. It's not like he was doing illegal drugs like heroin or crack. You drink and this happens to you. You don't know it can happen, you don't know you're going to be an alcoholic. You can't control it – it's a disease.

**Grace:** When we learned about what alcoholism was in middle school, the teacher asked the class what an alcoholic looked like. It was always white men, homeless and poor – no one that we would know. He said, "Well five of you in this room have alcoholic relatives," and I got really self-conscious thinking what if they knew I was one.

**Jared:** I thought of an alcoholic as an old guy from the '50's, sitting around drinking whiskey all the time.

**Grace:** I remember when he had the Saab. One time I was looking around in the trunk and I found empty bottles where the spare tire should have been. I remember thinking that was weird. Then another time I found a mini bottle in the car and I confronted Dad about it. At that time I knew he shouldn't be drinking and I wrote in my journal how angry I was. He told me it wasn't his and I believed him. After I confronted him and he told me it wasn't his I wrote in the journal about how relieved I was. It still makes me angry to look back on that. That he would lie. (She begins to cry.) Being a daughter – why would your Dad lie to you?

*On a 4<sup>th</sup> of July vacation on Cape Cod with family and friends, Sam once again drank to excess causing his family great pain and embarrassment. It would be one year and seven months before he entered treatment.*

**Jared:** The first time I knew my father had a problem with alcohol was after a Fourth of July vacation on the Cape. I guess he got drunk and made a fool of himself. He was apologizing for his behavior to me and my sisters, but I didn't know what he was talking about. I was confused, and I remember that Emma and Grace were really upset. Later Grace told me what had happened.

**Emma:** It was the Fourth of July and we had been at a barbeque on the Cape. Grace and I had to leave early and afterwards my Dad got really drunk. I heard back from someone who was there that he was walking on the beach and fell down in front of everyone. At first my reaction was, "So what? Who even cares?" But when I told my sister she said, "Jared was there." And then we were both so angry. It's funny how that was. We were just so worried about Jared. So when my father came in we confronted him about what had happened saying, "Jared can't be in these situations. You have to take care of this."

**Grace:** The confrontation about Dad's behavior on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July – a lot of it was about Jared, but it was also about public humiliation. It's one thing when he does it in our home, but to fall down in front of everyone... I was embarrassed for him and I was embarrassed for our family.

I was relieved that this time Emma cared enough to speak up. I felt that she always wanted to brush it off. She'd say, "That's Dad; that's the worst thing about him," but I wanted her to do something about it. Then I felt really good when she stood up to him and said something. It gave me faith in her again. Emma usually had a different approach. She was always really angry and wanted us to band together against Dad. She tried to make me feel better by trash talking about him, which I understand because it does make you feel better, but it wasn't right for me. That's not how I felt about him. I always felt that he was a victim and I know that Jared always felt that way. I thought of alcoholism as something that was really hard for him. In my head I compared it to trying to break a habit, trying to stop something I did every day and loved to do like watching TV. I did get angry at him eventually, although not like Emma. Jared never did.

**Emma:** We were always worrying about each other. "It's not about me, it's about them." I remember when he had the sit down talk with Grace and she was upset. Her reaction was so strong. When Grace cries, she cries. She can't breathe. I don't know why she was crying, it was scary for her I think. But it made me angry. I thought she was too young and he shouldn't have told her. And when he drove drunk with Jared ... You can drive 60 miles per hour into a wall but if that kid is in the back seat you had better die because if not, I'll kill you.

**Sam:** I drove with those kids. (He begins to cry.) Many times I drove. There's a God that looked over us. I put them in danger. I endangered their lives.

**Grace:** I was in high school and I didn't have my license yet. My mother was out of town. I was supposed to call Dad for a ride home from work and when I did he was asleep. It was early evening and he was not talking right. I didn't know what to do. I didn't even have a learner's permit so I couldn't drive with him in the passenger seat. I said I'd try to get a ride from someone else and he said, "No, I'm coming." So he came and he was driving really weird and I knew the whole time that I was in a dangerous situation and I hated him for putting me in it. It's one thing to lie to a kid or to mess them up emotionally, but to consciously put them in a physically, potentially deadly, situation...

*In an effort to resurrect his relationship with Jared and Grace, Sam planned a trip with them to Puerto Rico. There was a lot of enthusiasm for the idea and expectations were high. It would still be nine months before he entered treatment.*

**Sam:** Puerto Rico was terrible. It was a great concept – trying to get the kids back closer to me, spending time together. I don't really remember what happened. But I remember their fear.

**Jared:** Puerto Rico was the first instance where I knew it was really bad. Grace and I had been walking around the hotel and we saw him drinking at the bar. I never saw him drink and I knew it couldn't be good. We went to a restaurant and he couldn't even order his food he was so drunk. He couldn't read his menu and he kept slurring his words. The waiter didn't speak English anyway so it was really difficult. He had his glasses but he

still couldn't read the menu. The waiter even brought him a magnifying glass. Grace was really upset and left.

**Grace:** Jared tried to help him in the restaurant but Dad was so drunk he couldn't put sentences together. It was so messed up. Jared wasn't saying anything, but I was so pissed off. Dad kept saying, "What is wrong with you Grace." Finally I just left the table and went upstairs. I called my mother and she told me to go back down and get Jared. I said, "Yeah, okay." But in my head I was saying, "There's no fucking way I'm going back into that restaurant again." But then I thought it through and realized I couldn't sit there and leave Jared to deal with it alone. So I went back down to pull him out and he was all alone at the table.

**Jared:** First Grace left and then Dad left and I was alone, just sitting there. Grace came back and got me and then we stayed in the room. He kept trying to come in and we wouldn't let him. I had never seen him drinking so I didn't know what happened when he did. I wasn't scared but I didn't feel good. I didn't like seeing him like that.

**Grace:** We came back up and I tried to put on a good front for Jared. Dad came up awhile later with our food wrapped up. He kept trying to talk to us but I kept pushing the door closed between us. But Jared was concerned. (She starts to cry.) He was so scared that Dad was going to hurt himself. He kept wanting me to open the door to make sure Dad was okay. He didn't want him to leave his room. That was the most important thing to Jared, that Dad didn't leave his room. He was so afraid. So every time it got quiet and we couldn't hear him moving around Jared would make me open the door. Dad would just be sitting there chain smoking, going through the mini bar.

The next day we all went to breakfast and it was awkward as hell. Dad apologized and said it wouldn't be like that again. He said he knew he had ruined the trip and it had such good potential, just the three of us. And it really was such a great trip after that. He was so the Dad he is now. We went to the rainforest, we were laughing. I remember thinking on the way back home I just wanted it to be over, I didn't want to go home and have to talk to my mother about it. I wanted to just cut that night out and think of it as a good trip.

Emma called and asked how the trip was and I just said, "Fine." She was removed from it now, living at college, and I wanted her to be. She had been dealing with it forever and I didn't feel as though she needed to know. What good would it have done? I didn't want her to worry or to feel guilty, I wanted her to be happy.

*Sam's life was spiraling out of control. He was physically sick, the marriage was nearly at an end, and the children were estranged and fearful. Still, the idea of treatment was months away.*

**Sam:** At the end I was in so much trouble, my alcoholism was so acute, that my thoughts were consumed with surviving. It was so much work. It's hard trying to figure out how to plan your drinking, how to plan your lies. I was physically sick; I would throw up in the mornings. Still I would wake up wondering how I was going to drink that day. There was panic. I'd have empty bottles hidden in the house and I'd come back home after everyone had left in the morning to look for them. I couldn't remember where I'd hidden them. When I was buying liquor I would go to different places so it wouldn't look like I was buying every day. I would buy small bottles because if I had a big one I knew I'd drink it. That's how I would try to control it – by rationing the amount. In the end all you have is this empty gut feeling because of the shame, and then you're feeling sorry for

yourself, and then you're wondering how you're going to keep drinking. That's it. It's one big circle. There's no time to think of anything else; it's all consuming. The disease keeps pounding at you - you only want the drink and you'll accept just getting by with your family, your work.

**Jim:** I used to worry about what would have happened if the marriage had ended. He wouldn't want to have lived with us, the kids wouldn't want to be with him, and he most likely would have lost his job. What would we have had then?

**Grace:** Emma hated Dad for being an alcoholic and she hated my mother for being with him. Here was this woman she viewed as so strong... then why didn't she show some strength and leave him? She didn't see that staying in the marriage took strength, she saw it a weakness.

**Emma:** If the marriage had ended – which is what I wanted at the time - I think I would have felt relief, but I never would have the relationship I have with him now. I totally love him, being with him, talking to him. I believe that if the marriage had ended he would have died.

**Grace:** I think that once we understood that Dad was an alcoholic and banded together, the four of us, it wouldn't have been healthy for us if the marriage had ended. We would have had a lot of guilt, a lot of “what if's”. It wouldn't have been like *my mother* leaving him, it would have been like *us* leaving him. If that had been our lives then we would have missed out, and Dad would have missed out, on this whole relationship that we have now – the five of us. It would have been like watching something break and walking away leaving it broken, rather than putting it back together and healing which is so much better for us.

*One night Sam left his family and checked-in to a hotel in Stowe, Vermont. He was distraught and as was his way, drank to ease his pain. Something was different this time though. He felt overwhelmed. Thankfully, he picked up the phone... Treatment was now days away.*

**Sam:** At the end I could look at it and think, “God what am I going to do? I can’t stop this.” I was tired. I was ready to give up. I had the thoughts of suicide but I didn’t have the means. Phil (a family friend from Montpelier, contacted by Sam’s wife) came and made things safe again.

**Emma:** Once I wasn’t living here all the time I was under the impression that he was good for awhile and then there would be an episode. I knew there were episodes because every once in a while he would call me, usually from a hotel where he was travelling, and he would be drunk. He would go on and on about how much he loved me...and I would feel terrible afterwards. I hated those calls.

It was my senior year of college and I was getting ready to go out. My cell phone rang and when I checked the message it was Dad calling from a hotel in Stowe, rambling on about things, asking me to call him back. I thought he was “drunk dialing” me again and I had no intention of calling him back. I was desensitized to it all. I didn’t realize he was scraping bottom, reaching out to people. I feel some guilt about it even now because I didn’t understand the enormity of the situation. If anything had happened I don’t know what I would have done.

**Shirley:** The phone rang once and there was nobody there. I had a bad feeling about that call. Then he called back and he said, “Mom,” and I said, “Sam.” He said, “I’m not doing very well,” and I asked, “Where are you.” He said, “I’m in Stowe.” He said, “I love you,” and I said, “I love you too.” I said, “Sam you really need to get help now.

You're at the point where you need to do something." Then he hung up. I tried to call him back and there was no answer. I panicked because it sounded final. For the first time I was afraid he was going to commit suicide. He was so frustrated and so unhappy with himself. And we were far away. I felt panicked that I couldn't get to him, I couldn't protect him. I was so afraid.

**Jim:** I don't think I ever talked to him the night he was in Stowe. I sure was panicky though. His call just struck home as a suicidal attempt on his part. Then when his friend went up there and couldn't find him for awhile, we were sitting there wondering if he had gone over a cliff. It was an awful night because we were so removed. We couldn't be any help.

**Jared:** One night before he went to rehab, we were waiting for him to come home and he never came home. He called from a hotel in Stowe and he was drunk. He was really upset and he was saying his goodbye's to people. I was afraid but I never really believed it. Still, it doesn't feel very good when you hear your Dad saying goodbye.

**Grace:** I had been out celebrating my birthday. My friend dropped me off and for some reason I didn't want her to come in. I remember my pearls broke and it reminded me of the movie *Batman* when his Mom dies and the pearls are ripped from her neck and you seen them in black and white, falling to the ground. I came in and Jared said, "Dad's gone, go talk to Mom." I didn't really know what was going on but I was concerned because Jared was so upset. (She cries.) He was sitting alone in the living room playing that Tracy Chapman song over and over again, looking at pictures of Dad in albums and crying. I thought he had gone to bed and then I heard the music. I don't know how long he was sitting there alone and I didn't know what to do. I tried to hug him but he wanted

to be by himself and it wasn't good for him, I knew that. I couldn't tell him it was going to be alright because I didn't know. I knew that this time there was nothing I could say, it was too serious. I felt so helpless.

*With the help of family and friends, Sam realized that he had come to the end. He could no longer go on as he was. Plans were made to enter a 28-day inpatient rehabilitation program in Arizona called Sierra Tucson. When you enter the driveway there is a sign that reads, "Expect A Miracle..."*

**Sam:** It wasn't that I didn't feel I needed rehab, I was afraid of it. I took a couple of days so I could tidy up at work, but for those 2 days I was an emotional wreck. I couldn't talk to anybody. My wife carried a heavy burden because people were contacting me out of concern and to wish me well on my way but I couldn't talk to anybody. I kept breaking down.

A friend flew with me to Arizona. He had made all the arrangements, got up at a God awful hour to fly with me, drove two hours to Tucson, dropped me off and then turned around and got back on a plane the same day. It was an incredible show of friendship. They wouldn't let him hang around though. We just looked at each other in fear and sadness, had a tearful hug goodbye, and that was that. I was alone.

**Emma:** I was dreading the experience of rehab. I knew there would be all kinds of talk about feelings and emotions, rehashing old things. But it was definitely an enlightening experience. Clearly I didn't know a lot about the disease, about how deep it really ran. I saw my Dad in a new light. Instead of seeing him as pathetic and weak I saw how terrible it must have been for him to go through all that he went through. It must be one

of the hardest things for anyone to go through and the fact that he did it for so long and kept a relatively brave face, I saw him as strong. It was a nice revelation to have.

**Sam:** It was scary the whole time. It was the most difficult thing I've ever done.

Nothing compares in my life. I surrendered there. The whole feeling - the experience, the relationships you develop, the things you see, how you see the pain of others and relate it to your own, the way you live... You can't explain the experience to anyone who wasn't there. I found spirituality. I don't get on my knees when I get up in the morning but I still feel it.

**Emma:** For our family as a whole, I think it strengthened us. I was able to see the patterns – Jared and Grace would talk about their experiences and I realized I had experienced the same things too. I thought, “We're all on the same page here.” I asked them why they had never told me and they said, “Why didn't you? You're the older one, you should have warned us.” But I had blocked out a lot of my own experiences.

**Grace:** My mother always let us know that it was okay for us to let my father know how we felt about his drinking and a lot of strength came from that. Some kids I met at treatment blamed themselves for their parent's drinking. I never blamed myself, I always thought of it as his problem.

**Emma:** I think there was a lot of stuff that happened in our family that no one was talking about, and it all came out there. It was the pink elephant in the living room. Everyone was at their most basic humanity, there were no facades. The bottom line was that we all loved Dad and we were there to support him and help him however we could. We had what they call “carefrontations” and it was heartbreaking to watch. We were all

so genuinely upset and it must have been devastating for him to watch his kids in so much pain because of his behavior.

**Sam:** There's a big build-up to family week, a lot of preparation for what they call "carefrontations." You and your family member sit across from each other with one person confronting the other in a very structured manner recalling specific behaviors and how they made the other feel. "When your behavior was \_\_\_ it made me feel \_\_\_." It's a one way deal. You don't *respond*, you *listen*. It's hard to hear your loved ones tell you about things you've done that hurt them, especially while they are sitting 20 inches away from you in front of a group of other people.

**Emma:** No one worried about saying something that was embarrassing or offensive because it was what we had to do. All this stuff came up and the fact is we addressed it and talked about it and acknowledged it. We hadn't before and it was such a relief. Now we could go to the next step which was healing for him and for us.

He stayed there for two more weeks after we left and I was genuinely excited for him to come home. I'm so proud of him. I trust him completely.

**Grace:** My friend was saying, "I don't understand how you guys turned out how you did. It must have been so hard and you must have been so strong. How are you guys all who you are? How are you all so tight?" Sure I think we're affected by it, but I think it's affected us to make us stronger. And I think we're stronger only because of recovery. I never expected full recovery. I thought this was how it was always going to be, something you dealt with like cleaning out the litter box. But I do now – I don't expect him to relapse.

**Jim:** I feel really good about his experience at rehab. The love and affection on the part of the whole family is just so different. It's altogether different. I'm still a little worried that there will be a situation that may kick him over, not that he wouldn't reconstruct his life again. But it happens though.

**Shirley:** I was so grateful when he went to rehab, but I still wasn't convinced. It was hard for me to really believe. But he came home so high on the experience and everyone in his family seems so positive. Maybe it's because they all went together. I feel peaceful now, like he's going to be okay. I do believe that no matter what might come his way, he'll be able to cope. They'll be able to cope together. I'm jealous of their relationship, the relationship among the whole family. I'm jealous because I've never had that.

**Jared:** It was a part of my life but it's gone now. It's a part of the past. No hard feelings. I think he's really cool; I trust him.

**Grace:** It's like our family was reborn two years ago and we have this whole history we have let go and put behind us. We talked about him being an alcoholic more when he was drinking than we do now. When we think of Dad that's not who we think of anymore. But I don't know if it's healthy to not talk about the past, to just forget. It makes you appreciate a person more when you know their struggle, what might have been. It's so important to me that he knows it's a huge change, not just for him, but for all of us. I am so thankful for what he's done, what he's accomplished. He's the Dad I always wanted him to be.

**Emma:** I feel like girls have a special and specific kind of relationship with their dads. I think since I missed the period where girls think their fathers walk on water, I'm doing it now. He's funny, he's cool, and he's fun to be around. I am totally enamored with him.

**Sam:** It's amazing when you do the most important thing in your life when you're 48 years old. Going to rehab saved my life. It saved my family. Now it's a whole different world.

But it's bittersweet. The shame still pops up occasionally when I remember what I put my family through and how deeply I affected them. I try to think about them as they are now because they've done a lot of work too and I'm so thankful. I always loved my wife but I blamed her for what I couldn't understand about myself. When I got back it was like getting to know each other again. She welcomed me back with a concerned but open heart. I always loved my kids, but now I'm more conscious of just how much. I hadn't realized how much I had lost until I had them back. They show me incredible love; they trust me; they talk to me. They're no longer afraid.

*When you leave Sierra Tucson there is another sign that reads, "You Are A Miracle." This story is not yet finished...*

**Sam:** It's not even been two years that I'm sober. I'm not in a comfort zone, but I can't imagine myself drinking again. I have no desire. There's still work for me to do.

But there are signs everywhere. In Arizona there was this red cardinal that kept showing up. Here was this landscape of tumbleweeds in the dry desert and at daybreak this cardinal would be hanging around the smoking hut. We all believed it was a sign. One of the other guys even got a cardinal tattoo on his arm when he got out. The amazing thing for me though was when I came home, a red cardinal began hanging around my house. It would actually knock on the windows. It leaves in the summer but comes back each winter. This is the 3<sup>rd</sup> year it's come back.

Then there was the sky. Something about it overwhelmed me. When I walked out of those buildings it just grabbed me and pulled at my attention; pulled my focus up there. The sky still reminds me of my higher power. It taps me on the shoulder and says, “Hey, I’m here.” It calls to me. Sometimes at night when there are a lot of stars I’m reminded of the desert sky and I speak aloud. I say, “Thanks” to my God for being sober.