

free lance

Student alcoholics: Sobriety key to life

By PETE WALDRON **Collegian Staff Writer**

Both are young — Mary is 19 and Mike is 23. Both come from stable families with middle- to uppermiddle-class backgrounds.

In high school Mary always had good grades. Her teachers thought she could do no wrong. She was a member of the varsity tennis team and was active in many clubs.

Mike flexed his muscles on the high school football field and on the wrestling mat. He has been interested in music, playing both the guitar and the harmonica. Many people found it hard to believe Mary and Mike had a drinking problem — even themselves. But alcoholism strikes people of all ages in all walks of life: rich people, poor people, businessmen, homemakers, clergy - and

college students. At a school renowned for its party atmosphere, few people would notice other students' drinking problems. Anywhere else, most people would question the drunken behavior. But no heads turn here to watch intoxicated individuals stagger down College Avenue. With Friday happy hours, Saturday morning tailgates and Wednesday parties, drinking has almost become second nature.

Both Mary and Mike are what experts refer to as recovering alcoholics. Half of the one million recovering alcoholics in the world live in the United States. Mary has been sober for nine months while Mike has gone without drinking for almost two years. Now, their lives are centered around trying to stay sober.

However, both have run into many self-constructed pitfalls in trying to attain this sobriety. Mary and Mike suffered through many wounds, bitter arguments and selfhatred.

"I got into a lot of fights with my parents and said a lot of mean things to them," Mary (freshman-premedicine) recalls. "It was not a happy household when I was drinking. I would just come home and stir up trouble so I could leave.

"I feel bad that they had to be put through that. But I needed their arguments saying they thought something was wrong and trying to find out what was going on with me. Otherwise I would not have done anything with my drinking."

Many times alcoholics don't realize or maybe don't want to realize that they have a drinking problem. They usually construct a giant wall of denial 'When were you first an alcoholic?' is a question in the field that is hard to answer," Mike (junior-rehabilitation

education) says. "I heard a lot of people say, 'Well, I was an alcoholic the first time I drank. I like what it did. I was willing to make the sacrifice in other areas in order to enjoy what it did.' I think I would probably fit under that category. Mike, who transferred to the University last year,

remembers the first time he got drunk. He was only 12 years old. "The first time I got drunk it was really pretty neat," he

recalls. "It was sort of blissful insanity where you would just escape. "And once it became the escape — one drink is not the escape, two drinks are not the escape. So where before you

were looking for the bliss or fun of drinking, (drinking) became the escape." Mary was 13 years old the first time she drank. She had

taken some brandy from her parent's liquor cabinet and put it in an empty Bonnie Bell 10-0-6 bottle. "It just felt warm," she remembers. "But the taste was gross. I could feel the liquor going down. I felt happier than usual, but it wasn't really any big thrill. I think it was

just the part of sneaking it and getting away with it at first that made it so inviting.' For alcoholics, once the invitation is accepted, it's hard

urning it down the next time. "If there is at some point a magical line which you cross over into being an alcoholic where you can never go back to being a non-alcoholic, then I don't know at what point I became an alcoholic," Mike says. "It probably was in my senior year when I was learning how to really drink and test my tolerance. I would just go out and get drunk. "In the literature about alcoholism it says social drinkers won't do that. They will just drink socially to

enjoy society or enjoy being out with people as opposed to going out to enjoy drinking for its own sake. I don't know if ever went out to enjoy society as such. I went out just to enjoy drinking."

Those nights soon stretched into three-day binges. Time

became one big blur. And as true with alcoholism, drinking began to strangle Mike's life.

who you are or what kind of family life you had or how crying throughout this. It was really frightening. It was "I walked back thinking, 'you know successful you are - but it's how alcohol affects you specifically," he says. "It's not how it affects your culture or how it is seen in your culture as being good, bad or indifferent or dangerous for some and a toy for others but what it does to your life."

'I went to a frat party... it just got to be too much. Just having all that liquor around me and the smell of it and seeing drunk people disgusted me. It reminded me of me, and I didn't want to be reminded.'

-Mary, a 19-year-old recovering alcoholic

Manv alcoholics don't realize the self-destruction they are inflicting on themselves until it's almost too late. Usually it takes something drastic to jar them into saying, 'Hey. I have a problem.

One night Mary came home at four in the morning and found her parents had locked her out of the house. "I tried to go in the sliding door in the back, and I saw my parents standing there in the family room," she says. "And it kind of hit me that I better go (for help) because I realized how messed up I was.' Mary went for treatment for 33 days at Hazeldon's

Pioneer House in the Midwest. Mike went to rehabilitation at Gateway in Aliquippa, Pa. Although both were reluctant to undergo treatment, they are now thankful they realized their problem in time. When they finally said, "I am an alcoholic," both Mary and Mike saw that they had reached a turning point in their lives. "It was kind of by accident," Mary says as she

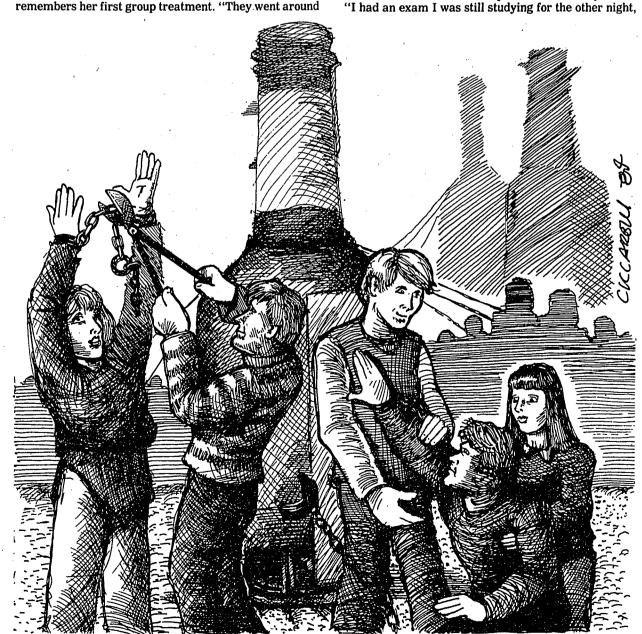
in a circle saying, 'I'm so-and-so. I'm an alcoholic.' "It's not the amount you drink or for how long you drink was Mary. So I said, 'I'm Mary. I am an alcoholic.' I was)rum and coke.' I just said, 'oh.' just like . . . oh, my God, I am.' When they were going through rehabilitation, Mary and

Mike, like all alcoholics, vowed to remain sober. William Eck, co-director of the University's Total Alcohol Awareness Program (TAAP) says sobriety is not just the avoidance of getting drunk but rather the total abstinence of beverage alcohol. Never touching alcohol is important if the alcoholic wishes to live a normal life again. "Total abstinence is the ability to live without drinking and gradually get to the point where you don't have the

urge to drink," Eck says. "You have to stop thinking about drinking and that every hour of every day you need one. "Alcoholics have to recondition their whole lifestyle. It sounds simplistic, but actually it's really very difficult." But living in a place like Happy Valley, where many students find every possible excuse to throw a party - for passing a test, failing a test or avoiding a test — is not

"When I came up here it was a lot different." Mike says. "There were definite times that I knew if I left the house. I would probably find a way to rationalize drinking. "Something a non-alcoholic person might have trouble understanding would be the feeling I get when I walk through town at night and see those lights flashing and hear people laughing inside the bars and having fun." Sometimes a once inviting temptation can turn into a paralyzing fear

"One thing I do know is that I don't want to go back there," Mike says. "That would be the worst thing for me, to go and drink again. That would be where I would lose a lot I have been working for — which is me. "Even if I started drinking socially, I would eventually work back into my total drinking, my 24-hour drinking. The fear that I might drink again is significant at times.' Mary has been faced with similiar fears. One night she called her Midwestern home because she was upset and wanted to get drunk. She didn't though. These past two months have been the hardest part of her sobriety.





"I had an exam I was still studying for the other night,

and I went down to get a can of Coke," she says. "The guy "When it got to me I didn't know that I could just say I I walked down with said, 'I think I'll go back and have a

get drunk right now and say the heck with it. But I can't because I have to study.' If studying wasn't here, (drinking) would be such an easy way out. I don't think I would have done it, but the option still pops into my head." And sometimes a once inviting temptation for an

alcoholic can become gross. "I went to a frat party," Mary confides. "I didn't even know what a frat party was. I had some idea but I didn't think it was like it was. The only way I can describe it was they were just pushing the beer out. Everybody is just taking the beer and it's spilling all over you.

'Something a non-alcoholic person might have trouble understanding would be the feeling I get when I walk through town at night and see those lights flashing and hear people laughing inside the bars and having fun. One thing I do know is that I don't want to go back there. That would be the worst thing for me, to go and drink again. That would be where I would lose a lot I have been working for — which is

-Mike, a 23-year-old recovering alcoholic

"It just got to be too much. Just having all that liquor around me and the smell of it and seeing drunk people disgusted me. It reminded me of me and I didn't want to be reminded. Mary says that after this year she plans to transfer to a

Midwestern school close to home, but adds that she is not running from the social scene at Penn State. "No matter where I go, I know there is going to be drinking," she says. "If you just keep saying you'll drink tomorrow and as you get into tomorrow it's today. So you keep on putting it off and it lengthens into months and

And that's where Alcoholics Anonymous steps in. The support group is made up of men and women whose only. objective is to help each other stop drinking and stay sober. More than 53,000 groups exist worldwide, and in State College groups meet every night of the week. After an alcoholic undergoes rehabilitation, it is suggested that they attend 90 meetings in 90 days. Some $_{\odot}$ alcoholics attend more, some less. No matter how many, everyone says it helps.

"When I was drinking I was working on being a totally independent person," Mike says. "I was trying not to need anybody at all. That was lonely.

"Today I have other people. I am becoming a person. An alcoholic is very limited. There is so much time spent in . the drunken state or trying to get into that drunken state:. And then there is so much regret at being in that drunken state or wanting to be in that state. "The idea is if I don't drink I can learn how to give, how to be honest with myself and how to enjoy people." Mary says Alcoholics Anonymous has given back her

"Before I thought everything was under control and everything was just fine, but it was screwed up," she says. "Now things are finally almost normal. I have a better relationship with my family and friends. I am going to college. If I had kept on drinking, sure, I might have gone to college but I probably would have flunked out. "Now I can study, and I don't cheat on tests. That's what I did mostly through high school, cheat my way through, even though I had the brains to do it. I'm learning things and making my own decisions. "I'm not relying so much on what people think about

me," Mary continues. "It's more what I think about myself. I can finally say I like myself." Neither Mary nor Mike likes thinking about whethe thev will drink again. "That's just too much to think about," Mary says. "I'm

ust going to take it one day at a time."