

HONESTLY HONORABLE - UK STUDENT GOT A SECOND CHANCE WITH HIS CHILD -- AND A MEDAL TOO CANDID THESIS DIVULGED THE PAIN OF REHAB

Lexington Herald-Leader (KY) - May 10, 2003

- Author/Byline: Mark Story, Herald-Leader Staff Writer
- Edition: Final
- Section: Main News
- Page: A1

Every graduation ceremony is a vast mosaic.

A big picture comprising myriad individual stories, each of them a unique tale of success.

Among the 4,148 upon whom the University of Kentucky will confer degrees today, it is hard to imagine anyone with a more compelling story than Jonathan "Finn" ██████

Having entered UK at mid-life -- after surviving bankruptcy, divorce, alcoholism and a despair so dark it led to thoughts of suicide -- Green, 44, will graduate Phi Beta Kappa with a degree in English.

He will do so having completed the honors program at UK, rare for a non-traditional student.

Even more, he will be one of three to receive the prestigious Sullivan Medallion, an award given annually by UK to those who display exceptional love and concern for other people.

Yet, for reasons you will come to understand, what will mean the most to Finn ██████ today is that his 20-year-old daughter, Mears, will drive from her home in Cincinnati to see him graduate.

"Becoming a father that my daughter could love," Finn ██████ said last week, "that's my big accomplishment."

Even in the hyperbole-driven world of the college recommendation letter, those who nominated him for the Sullivan speak of Finn ██████ in terms so lavish it would make a saint blush.

English professor James Baker Hall says of ██████, "there isn't a ... sweeter, dearer man around these days, or one more admired or loved."

Another former teacher, John Greenway, attributes the best student evaluations of his teaching career to the passion for learning that ██████ fostered in his class.

Lauretta Byars, who serves on the committee that awards the Sullivan, says ██████ "took caring for other people a cut above. His compassion stands out."

Yet, what makes ██████ story exceptional is that, by his own admission, he spent a good part of his pre-UK life with the throttle wide open, headed straight down self-destruction highway.

In his 20s, Finn ██████ -- a product of a family long prominent in Lexington horse circles -- built a multimillion-dollar company consigning thoroughbred horses.

He was riding high; brash and cocky. "Nobody could tell me anything. I knew it all," he says with a rueful grin.

Yet, to his shock, interest rates skyrocketed, he had borrowed far too much money -- and his company wound up bankrupt.

Then things got worse. Finn was fired from another job at a prestigious horse farm. He lost his family's house as a result of an IRS lien that arose from his own failed business.

Then things got worse. ██████ first wife left him. He became such a distracted, absent father that Mears, his daughter, first stopped calling him dad and then pretty much quit talking to him, period.

Then things got worse. Sinking into a despair-filled abyss, he all but drowned in alcohol.

From 1987-92, "I began drinking early, all day, every day, as much as I could drink," he says.

An outgoing, congenial man, ██████ became something of a recluse. He withdrew to an isolated farmhouse.

"I did not like who I was," he says. "Actually, I hated myself."

The bottom came on July 11, 1992.

█████ was supposed to pick up Mears at a camp in Jessamine County. He had been drinking.

By the time he got there, he was many hours late and his daughter, then 9, was the only child left -- sitting by herself with a counselor.

In that moment, "I felt like I had failed as a father," █████ says. "And I had failed as a father."

Still, his voice dripping with irony, █████ says he felt so bad "that I thought the best thing for me to do was to drink some more. So I did."

Later that night, as he looked in on his sleeping daughter, █████ was overwhelmed with shame and self-loathing.

"I thought about killing myself," he says. Instead, he walked into the bathroom and dropped to his knees. There, he asked God for help.

"That began my sober life," █████ says. With the help of support groups, he says, he has not had a drink since.

Yet the path that led Finn █████ from the night he refers to as his "spiritual intervention" to becoming an honored graduate from the University of Kentucky was still turn-filled.

In many cases, the children of alcoholics are deeply affected by their parents' affliction.

When she was little, Mears █████ says, she wondered "why nobody else's dad acted like this."

"I wondered why I wasn't important enough" for her dad to be around more, to act normal when he was around.

Although she does not blame her own problems solely on her dad, Mears started drinking when she was 11.

By the time she was 16, she told her parents she could not stop "drinking and taking drugs. I need help."

Eventually, Finn and his ex-wife placed their daughter in a rigorous substance-abuse program, Kids Helping Kids, in suburban Cincinnati.

"It was the hardest thing I ever did," Mears █████ says of the rehab. "But I'd be dead now if I hadn't done it."

Watching his daughter's treatment infused Finn █████ with a passion for helping other teens with similar troubles.

With Mears' permission, he wrote his honors thesis at UK on the steps involved in her rehab.

It is a powerful, remarkably frank account.

"We talked about it," Finn says. "And we decided that the chance to help people outweighed" privacy concerns.

Today, Mears is an English major at the University of Cincinnati. She has a job at Fifth Third Bank. She hopes to be a writer.

She isn't drinking.

And she will be there when her dad is recognized at commencement today with one of the highest honors the University of Kentucky confers.

"Restoring that relationship," Finn █████ says, "that's the one thing I'm really proud of. I'm proud to be her father."

Every graduation ceremony is a vast mosaic of success stories.

Some more vivid than others.

Reach Mark Story at (859) 231-3230, 1-800-950-6397, Ext. 3230; or mstory@herald-leader.com.

Degree day Schedule for ceremonies at UK and, elsewhere Page B3

- Caption: - JOSEPH REY AU Finn █████ will graduate with honors from the University of Kentucky with a bachelor's degree in English, but he said rebuilding his relationship with his daughter is his biggest achievement.

• Record: 0305120154

• Copyright: Copyright (c) 2003 Lexington Herald-Leader