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Grand Prize Winner

My high school years were, in a word, wholesome. I enjoyed myself, excelled in the classroom and on the basketball court, and was generally well liked. I turned down parties in favor of spending time with friends without the corruption of alcohol. I didn't need to drink to fit in with them and could count on a good time free of the influence of any substance.

Along came college. I was alone, one of 38,000 students and far away from home. I was of vague acquaintance with two girls from my school, but aside from them I didn't know a soul. At first I felt no temptation for alcohol, but as time passed and I witnessed my peers around me forming drink-aided friendships, foreign thoughts of "What if?" crept into my mind. I inevitably accepted the invitation of some of my floor mates to go out. Not wanting to feel like a cobra at a mongoose convention, I decided to try drinking like the rest of the mongooses. A stellar beer pong performance was accompanied by cheers of teammates and attention from female admirers. Alcohol wasn't so bad after all. Sip. My jokes were wittier, I had a newfound ease of conversation, and I possessed an air of confidence that was previously dormant. Why hadn't I done this in high school? Sip. Sip. I retained all of the elements of my personality and humor, everything about me was still me, just a socially enhanced version. It would have been worth it anyway, but the next day came with no consequence, brought with it no hangover. I was as fresh as a daisy and the only thing the morning brought was a recount the night before with the guys during breakfast. I was no longer my high school self. I had done things I had consciously withstood, yet there was no guilt; if anything, I felt more right than before. Why should I feel guilty about enjoying college, the so-called "best years of my life"? How should I be expected to spend these cherished years? With my nose stuck in a book, or out making memories? I liked this newly discovered college life and wanted more.

This is *Phase I*. The amber liquid makes the sky glisten with gold, turns the whirling wind to song, and frees your soul. The honeymoon is nice. You have acne? Alcohol is the new and improved tetracycline. You're Richie Cunningham from *Happy Days*? Alcohol upgrades you to "The Fonz". Your body is shaped like the Grinch? Alcohol molds your physique to that of a Greek God. Can't get any girls? Bang! All the sudden you're a hybrid of Brad Pitt and Hugh Heffner; Brad's looks, Heff's Heffness. In your mind, at least.

Alas, all good things must come to an end; earlier I used the word *phase*, because that's what this lifestyle is. Eventually and hopefully you grow out of it. Perhaps there is an epiphany. A bastard of a hangover, a blackout that elicits responses of "I did what!?" when your friends explain that smell in the dormitory elevator, the phallic depictions tattooed to your back with sharpie after a wild night, those salves and creams you now have to use compliments of that cute beer pong partner, something like that. Perhaps your revelation occurs gradually. Maybe the party scene loses its novelty and you realize that drinking for drunkenness' sake isn't a very good reason at all. Maybe your grades start to slip. Maybe all of these factors combine and provide you with all the motivation you need to mature and find yourself without alcohol. I think this is what happened in my case.

These examples may seem a bit farfetched, but I have been the victim, witness, or culprit in each of these events, and I'm not the only one. AlcoholEdu cites some pretty alarming statistics that I initially overlooked because I couldn't see myself drinking in the future. In a typical two week period, over half of high-risk drinkers admitted to doing something they later regretted, around that same number missed class, nearly one out of five got hurt or injured, and nearly one out of ten got in trouble with the police. Drunkards inconvenience the rest of the population, as well. 60 percent had their studying or sleep disturbed, 15 percent had personal belongings damaged, and

almost nine percent had been pushed, hit, or assaulted. This is not exactly model behavior and I am ashamed to have been a part of these types of improprieties.

I cannot preach complete abstinence from alcohol; it has its place on a college campus and will always be a part of college life. I *can* contend that it is not the only part, and it is certainly not the most defining. There are plenty of ways to have fun and socialize that don't include intoxication, like intramural sports, the variety of clubs and groups offered in college, and university planned activities and performances. For me, the good times that I had with my old buddy Alcohol started to come with consequence and regret. I believe that what is right is what feels good afterwards, and eventually my feelings of rightness after large-scale partying dwindled. I will still have the occasional beer and frequent the occasional party, but now I realize that college life is not about frenzied boozing, not the college life I wish to lead anyway. Most people don't continue the *Animal House* lifestyle after school, and I think that as people mature, they generally grow out of this behavior. At a recent party, a full grown man asked me, "Why are you the only dude in this room with his shirt on?" to which I replied, "Why are you the only divorced 34 year old at this party?" I don't want to be that guy. No one wants to be that guy. Eventually everyone will come to find that alcohol isn't the miracle nectar that *Phase I* might lead you to believe; it is simply a matter of when.