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Former gang member says natural high is better

Leeds, Ala., is the hometown of at least two men who have overcome the odds. One is Basketball Hall of Famer and Inside the NBA analyst Charles Barkley. The other is Eric Sewell, one of seven children born into poverty and raised on the grit and determination of a hardworking single mother.

The family moved from Alabama to Knoxville when Sewell was about 6 years old. "My mom worked in the cafeteria at Tennessee School for the Deaf," he explained. "She had a job and she always kept a clean house."

"We were low-income so we lived in project areas where there was always violence, crimes and drug use. It was the way of life there," he said. "As a teenager, I got to noticing my friends would disappear; some would go to jail, some would get killed. I had something inside me telling me 'you got to do better than this.'"

"I did plenty of things I ought not to have done, but I did my school work before I went out with friends, and I graduated from Austin-East High School and then I got a job with the railroad as a track laborer," he explained.

Although it was the 1970s, Sewell said that he and other African-American workers faced discrimination on the job.

"We got the hottest, hardest, dirtiest jobs," he recalled. "I was an athlete and I didn't let it get me down because I always had a drive inside me and I could do anything they asked."

"I worked hard – I have never quit a job and I have never been fired from a job," Sewell said. "I would dream about what I could accomplish, things like a house on the lake or a wife and kids."

After the railroad job, Sewell worked construction jobs.

"I learned everything I could," he said. "I'm still really proud when I drive around Knoxville and see all of the beautiful buildings that I worked on like the Museum of Art, the water feature for the World's Fair Park, and the Church of the Latter-Day Saints," he said.

"On every job, I found a place to write on a board in a hidden spot, 'Eric Lynn Sewell, a black carpenter, helped build this,'" he said.

His dreams of marriage and a house were attained. All during this time, Sewell was battling with intermittent drug use. Then his younger brother died and depression set in.

He moved to the projects once again where the sound of gunfire was common, but he never fully adopted the lifestyle.

"My apartment was kind of like a safe house for those within the projects, and word

Eric Sewell serves his prize-winning "secret sauce" chicken wings, Polish sausages and more for lunch at his business, Easy Q Barbecue, on weekends at the flea market located near Chilhowee Park in Knoxville.

got around," he said. "My house stayed clean, I had food that I would share. If someone needed a safe place to sleep, or a place to take a shower, they knew they could come to my place."

This caregiver role was surely learned from Sewell's mother, who taught him many cooking techniques. "She'd pinch, but never measure and she would hum while she cooked," he said. "I spent a lot of time in the kitchen with her. She would tell me, 'Boy, if you wasn't my son, I'd marry you because you keep a clean house, you work hard and you know how to cook!'"

Nonetheless, Sewell became part of a gang. He says he never set out to do it, but it "just sort of happened."

"In those days, we didn't call it a gang, it was just 'the organization.' There was a large organization of drug runners from Florida that would come here to sell their stuff. I was employed as a watch man, which meant I got paid to watch if any police were coming. This was in the early 1980s and I worked an eight-hour shift, sometimes making as much as \$500 a day,"

Although he was on the 'Florida Boys' payroll for about five years, the vigil for law enforcement is where Sewell's gang involvement ended. "I never would hurt anybody or steal anything," he said. "In fact, we watch men kind of viewed ourselves as the Robin Hoods of our neighborhood. We put money back into



Sewell holds the dreadlocks that he keeps as a reminder of his former lifestyle. It took at least 10 years to grow the dreadlocks, and even longer to kick addiction. Today, Sewell wears leather amulets that signify the accomplishments he has made at Peninsula on his journey to recovery.

the basic needs of community."

"We supported parents by paying light bills and rent. We bought food for them. And we supported neighborhood children on all holidays by making sure they were taken care of," he continued.

During this time, Sewell's wife gave birth to twins. She died in 2001 from lupus which tested Sewell's emotional reserve.

His beloved mother passed away in 2005,

which sent Sewell spiraling into depression that, combined with addiction, eventually led him to Peninsula.

"It's never been easy," he admits.

However, there seem to be people put in Sewell's path to encourage him when he needed it most, like the neighbor who gave him a beautiful red Bible that he cherishes.

He also credits Sarah Moore Greene for giving him the first spot to cook. Greene, who died earlier this year, was known for her desegregation efforts of lunch counters, theaters and other public places in the Knoxville area. She was the first African-American to serve on the Knoxville Board of Education and was the first African-American to serve as a Tennessee delegate to the Republican National Convention.

"She's one of my heroes," Sewell said. "I asked her if I could cook food on a lot that she owned on the corner of McCalla Avenue and Chestnut Street because it had a night light on it, and she said yes."

Another hand up was provided by Charles Holland, on whose property Sewell now operates a barbecue business.

Sewell's chicken wings recently garnered him a first-place prize of a 42" flat-screen television at a church cook-off.

"It's my dry-rub that tastes so good," he said. "It took me seven years to perfect it, but I'm not going to say what all is in it. That's my secret."

Sewell is willing to tell anyone who will listen what getting support at Peninsula has meant for him.

He is a participant in the Recovery Education Center classes four days a week where he learns about things such as self-esteem and WRAP (Wellness Recovery Action Plan.) He gets support for staying clean from addiction and also takes life skills classes including computer instruction in an environment of encouragement from staff and other students. On Thursday evening and all day Friday, Sewell marinades the chicken and prepares other foods for Easy Q Barbecue, which is open on Saturday.

"I'm a whole new me because I have the tools I need to make my life better," he said. "I thought I was just going to come to Peninsula for about 10 days, and now I don't know when I'll leave!"

"I just want to say to anyone who may read this, no matter how long you have been addicted, you can change for the better," he declared.

"This year is one of the best years of my life so far," Sewell declared, "I've been clean over a year and it seems like all my senses are heightened. I can see, smell and hear better – I notice life. It's a natural high and it's better."

Symptoms of depression often different in men

Depression may go unrecognized by the men who have it, their families and friends, and even their physicians. Some men who suspect depression may be unlikely to admit to its symptoms because they think it may make them seem weak. Depressive illnesses affect an estimated 6 million U.S. men each year. The good news is that depression is one of the most treatable mental illnesses.

Symptoms include:

- Persistent sad, anxious, or "empty" mood
- Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness
- Loss of interest in hobbies and activities that were once enjoyed, including sex
- Decreased energy or fatigue
- Difficulty concentrating,

remembering, making decisions

- Trouble sleeping, early-morning awakening, or oversleeping
- Appetite and/or weight changes
- Thoughts of death or suicide, or suicide attempts
- Restlessness, irritability
- Persistent physical symptoms, such as headaches, digestive disorders and chronic pain, which do not respond to routine treatment.

Men are more likely than women to report alcohol and drug abuse or dependence in their lifetime. Substance abuse can mask

depression, making it harder to recognize depression as a separate illness that needs treatment

Instead of acknowledging their feelings, asking for help or seek-

Men may be more willing to report fatigue, irritability, loss of interest in work or hobbies and sleep disturbances rather than feelings of sadness, worthlessness and excessive guilt.

ing appropriate treatment, men may turn to alcohol or street drugs when they are depressed, or become frustrated, discouraged, angry, irritable and, sometimes, violently abusive.

Some men may deal with depression by throwing themselves compulsively into their work, at-

tempting to hide their depression from themselves, family and friends; other men may respond to depression by engaging in reckless behavior, taking risks and putting themselves in harm's way.

Four times as many men as women die by suicide in the United States. Because suicide is often associated with depression, the alarming suicide rate among men may reflect that men are less likely to seek treatment for depression. Many men with depression do not obtain adequate diagnosis and treatment—things which may be life-saving.

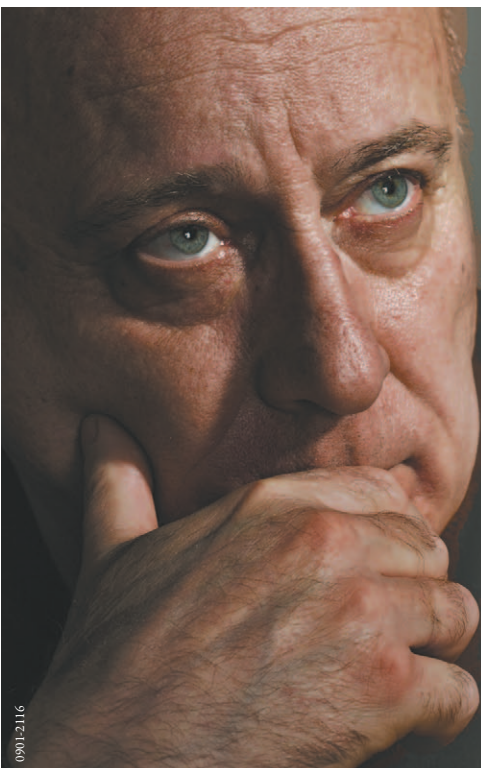
Family members, friends and employee assistance professionals in the workplace also can play

important roles in recognizing depressive symptoms in men and helping them get treatment. Help is available from family doctors, mental health specialists in mental health clinics or private clinics, and from other health professionals.

A variety of treatments, including medications and short-term psychotherapies (i.e. "talking" therapies), have proven effective for depressive disorders: more than 80 percent of people with a depressive illness improve with appropriate treatment. Not only can treatment lessen the severity of depression, but it may also reduce the duration of the episode and may help prevent additional bouts of depression.

Source: National Institutes of Health publication

For help, call Peninsula at 970-9800



He believes depression is a sign of weakness.

One in 10 men will develop clinically significant depression during his lifetime. Many experience depression that is triggered by life changes such as retirement, the death of a spouse or a changed health status.

Depression is NOT a normal part of aging, but it IS one of the most treatable behavioral disorders.

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Call (865) 970-9800 for caring, confidential help.