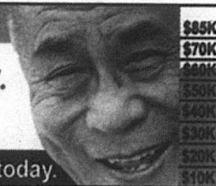


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REAL CHANGE

The Man who Stood on the Bridge

One young man's history of childhood abuse, incarceration, and demonic visions that led him to the Aurora Bridge last October. His story, Part 1 of a three-part series, begins on Page 5.

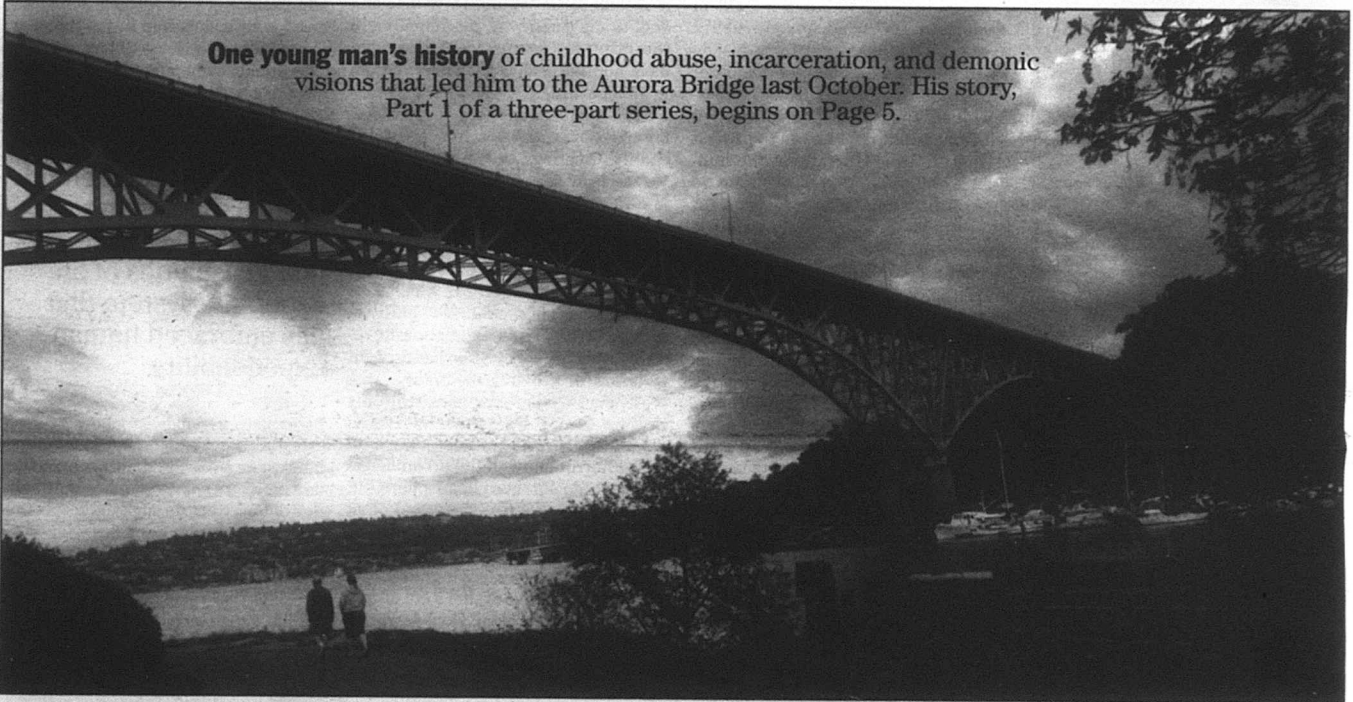


Photo by Joel Turner



Photo by Lucien Krutson

It's not easy being Cindy Sheehan

From anti-war icon to congressional candidate, a mother's grief has been both a boon and a black mark on her activism... see page 4.

Credit Check: New housing at Ft. Lawton will turn away potential tenants with spotty rental history or criminal records...p.3

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What led the 24-year-old Bret Hugh Winch to the Aurora Bridge last October?

The first installment of a three-part series looks at the young man's early life, one marked by abuse, mental illness, and a major felony conviction

The Man who Stood on the Bridge

Pt. 1: All around him, bridges

By ROSETTE ROYALE, Staff Reporter

Standing on the Aurora Bridge, a man.

Behind him, along Aurora Ave., vehicles race north and south. Some 130 feet below him, on N. 34th St., the occasional car. It's a little after 10 in the morning.

He's been here for — how long? One minute? Two? Three? Maybe more?

No one can say for sure because no one knows when he caught the bus that brought him to the nearest stop. No one knows just when he set foot on the bridge. But he won't be here long. By 10:22 a.m., the ordeal on the bridge will be over.

Earlier in the morning, around 9 o'clock, he sat in the day room of the downtown parole office. His parole officer had told the man to wait there while he tried to solve the man's housing crisis, even if it meant all day. But when the parole officer went to check on him, the man was gone.

And now, here he stands, on the Aurora Bridge. It's Oct. 17, 2007.

The bridge was built in 1932. A regis-

Since its construction, more than 230 people have jumped to their deaths from the Aurora Bridge. It ranks second in the nation for most suicides by jumping.

tered historic landmark, it stretches 898 feet across Lake Union. From a distance, it resembles a giant silver crown turned on its points.

Since its construction, more than 230 people have jumped to their deaths here. The Aurora Bridge ranks second in the nation for most suicides by jumping.

And now, he stands on the same bridge where hundreds before him have leapt to the water or the ground below.

But this man: Who is he? Like all people, he has many facets.

A son. A friend. A compassionate being. A vulnerable child. An angel. A menace to society. A man who hears voices. A man who sees demons. A registered sex offender. Quite the character. A lost soul.

The people who know him see in him these traits, these identities. In his life, they find many stories. They acknowledge his presence has impacted their lives.

Yet this morning, before any of them are aware where he is, he stands on the bridge.

But why? Why has he chosen to come here? Why does he, why does anyone consider suicide?

Such questions are timeless. They have been asked before. Surely, they'll be asked again. That's because survivors seek answers. They look back, mining the past for clues.

Sadly, none ever fully resolve the questions, because the questions have no answers. They're riddles only one person can solve. He's the person no longer here.

But no one has reason to ask the unanswerable this morning, at 10:14 a.m.

That's the moment Bret Hugh Winch, the 24-year-old standing on the Aurora Bridge on a mostly sunny day, takes out his cell phone. He dials a friend who lives just down the hall. He calls to say he's on a bridge.

And this time, he intends to jump.

Jumpy. The young Bret was jumpy.

And, his uncle, Raymond Shoquist, remembers, he got into things. Nothing bad, at least not then, but the boy had a tendency to misbehave.

Bret played with Shoquist's children and as the uncle watched, he could see his nephew was — what exactly? Amped up? Hyperactive? "I didn't know," Shoquist confesses. "A trying to fit in, and half the time, he wasn't trying hard enough. Or he was trying too hard."

Other people saw it in the young boy, too, including a doctor. Bret's mother took the boy to see someone, telling Shoquist later the child had been prescribed Ritalin, used to treat children diagnosed with ADD/ADHD (Attention Deficit & Hyperactivity Disorder.) And the antidepressant Prozac: Bret took that too.

These drugs would signal Bret's entry into a lifetime of prescription medications. At points, his adherence to his ever-changing regimen would prove to be a struggle. When he failed, he often made poor decisions, ones that affected others as well as himself.

In rare cases, Prozac can unmask tics or symptoms of Tourette's Syndrome, a neurological condition characterized by involuntary muscle movements. Some doctors eventually would believe Bret had the syndrome when he got older, because he developed a habitual blink that would continue.

His parents were young when he was born in 1982 — his mother had just



On the morning of Oct. 17, 2007, 24-year old Bret Hugh Winch rode a bus to the Aurora Bridge. Minutes later, he was standing on the bridge's western ledge. What brought him here? Photo by Joel Turner

turned 24 — and they lived north of Seattle. Not long after the birth of their only child, their relationship hit a rough patch. Maybe the drinking played a part. But the couple, who had never married, separated. Bret was still a toddler.

His mother had family on Whidbey Island, connected to the naval base, and her brother introduced her to a buddy who was just getting out of the service. The two hit it off. In 1987, barely five years old, Bret found himself with an ex-sailor as a stepfather. Shoquist recalls visiting his sister-in-law and her new

Prozac and Ritalin would signal Bret's entry into a lifetime of prescription medications. At points, his adherence to his ever-changing regimen would prove to be a struggle. When he failed, he often made poor decisions.

husband, who sometimes fought. "We used to see them all the time."

But putting down roots has become a sometime thing. And the newlyweds, with Bret in tow, bopped around. With them being constantly on the move, Shoquist saw the couple, and his nephew, less and less. He found it harder to see them when Bret's family set anchor in Cowlitz County, in southwestern Washington, where all around them lay bridges.

Arcing over the Cowlitz River was the W. Cowlitz Way Bridge; a few blocks further south, the Allen St. Bridge. To-

gether, they carried traffic above the tributary, connecting the city of Kelso to Longview.

But neither structure, both a few blocks in length, could compare to what lay roughly seven miles south: the Lewis and Clark Bridge, a mile-and-a-half long behemoth stretching above the steady flow of the Columbia.

From Longview to Kelso, from Kelso to Longview Bret and his mother and stepfather bounced, staying in apartments here, trailers there, traversing the bridges. A few extended family members — aunts, uncles, cousins — moved close by, seeking a quiet place to retire.

Along with Shoquist, other family members continued to live in distant places and once, while still an elementary school student, Bret went to see a relative other than his uncle for an overnight visit. The relative, an older male, invited the seven-year-old Bret to share his bed. The older male was naked. Bret wouldn't talk about what took place.

Years later, his mother, while discussing Bret's sex offense charges with authorities, would reference the sleepover, but would never say if anything sexual happened to her son that evening. Though her actions seemed to speak for her.

Bret, long after grade school, never had contact with this relative again.

The school system deemed Bret a "slow learner." As a result, he sat in special education classes. But even in the new setting, staying on task proved difficult. He



BRET, Continued from Page 5

had a hard time concentrating. And sometimes, he couldn't remember things.

He did recall, when he was 11, being admitted to a psychiatric hospital. Though when he was seven — or eight, maybe: he wasn't sure — he spent time at Dammasch State, another psychiatric hospital and asylum south of Portland.

Bret never enjoyed being alone, so, with the relatives who did live close by, he spent as much time as he could. He hung out with a male cousin just a few years younger than him. They played together and, on a few occasions, his cousin shared his porn magazines with Bret. Sometimes, when the two were alone, they'd watch the Playboy Channel.

Visits with his cousin and other relations got him out of his own house, where family life proved dysfunctional, if not chaotic. Not that he had any trouble with his mother: They maintained a good relationship. But when it came to his stepfather, the two butted heads.

By the time he'd reached his teens, the battles with his stepdad escalated. If Bret forgot to take out the garbage, he'd get beaten. When he turned his music up too loud, his possessions would be taken away as punishment. If he came home late, he'd have to spend the night outside. His stepfather would get so mad at him, he wouldn't allow Bret to sit at the kitchen table: He'd make him eat from off the top of the garbage can.

Bret's mother had it no easier. In 2005, during divorce proceedings, she'd confess what her dating and married life to Bret's stepdad had amounted to: abuse — verbal, sexual, physical, mental. Cheating, manipulating, controlling. Ambulances, hospitals. "Eighteen years of my life was all lies."

Though Bret dealt with more than abuse at home. Thanks to five juvenile offenses he'd racked up by the time he

was 17, he had been in and out of juvenile detention centers. Bret tended not to talk about his early crimes. Instead, he secreted the information away, similar to how once, while in juvy, he hid himself in the empty girls' locker room, hoping to see something when they returned. Staff caught him before the girls re-entered.

Home, juvy, home, juvy, and, in between, foster care. From his youth and into his teens, Bret lived in numerous foster homes. Not that he enjoyed them. Whenever an opportunity arose, he'd run away. That wasn't so easy to do from juvy.

During his times at home, tensions remained at a simmer, flaring to a boil during confrontations with his stepfather. Though any referee who might have observed their run-ins would have sent them to their corners. Bret's stepfather stood 6'2", tipping the scales at 260. The 17-year-old Bret stood 5'5", coming in at 135. Heavyweight vs. lightweight.

In early January 2000, right before his stepfather's 38th birthday, Bret ran away. It would take two days before his stepdad alerted police to the missing teen. As an identifying feature, he told police the left side of Bret's face was red due to a recent bike accident. His running away amounted to a parole violation, and when police found him, they sent him, once again, to juvy.

Out of juvy six months later, he was placed in a foster home in Kalama, WA, 17

By Nov. 7, 2000, he'd foregone his psychiatric medications. Some time before 6 p.m. that evening, Bret rode his bike to an adult female relative's house.

miles from his family. History repeated itself when he ran away. Police picked him up

with two other teens. But that foster home proved to be his last, because by early November 2000, Bret, not quite 18, had moved back in with his mother and stepfather.

By Nov. 7, 2000, he'd foregone his psychiatric medications. Some time before 6 p.m. that evening, Bret rode his bike to an adult female relative's house. At home with her were two of Bret's younger relatives, a boy and a four-year-old girl. The children's bedtime approached.

As the female relative helped the young boy into his pj's in the living room, Bret and the young girl sat in the kids' bedroom, watching Rugrats. With the boy changed, the relative went to check on the young girl. There the child sat, with Bret, looking at TV. Leaving the room, the relative told the girl to follow with her pj's. The child stayed put.

No surprise, thought the relative. The girl suffered emotional disabilities and had a stubborn streak. And she knew what pj's meant: bed. The relative sat down to wait her out.

Then she heard the bedroom door shut. Walking up the hall came the young boy. Go back and open the door, she told him. He obeyed, returning to the room before closing the door again.

Open, close, open, close. This went on for about 10 minutes. By then, the relative had enough. It was time to get the child in her pj's. She walked down the hall.

Quietly, she opened the door. And stopped.

She spotted Bret kneeling in front of the girl. One of his hands was on her genitals. The other was on its way toward her. She was lying on her back, legs spread. Her diaper was under the bed.

What are you doing? she screamed. Bret hadn't seen her. He turned toward the door. At first, he didn't speak. Then he said, I don't know.

She ordered him to leave. He fled on his bike. She dialed 911.

At home, Bret called the relative's house. An older male relative answered: He told Bret he was no longer welcome.

Bret only stayed home a couple of minutes. Just long enough to yell to his stepfather that he had to apologize to someone. Then off he rode on his bike. His stepfather didn't hear anything else.

I'm in trouble with the Department of Corrections...I want you to know I'm not upset with you...But I have to do this...I'm on a bridge.

Until later that evening, when the phone rang. It was Bret, calling from Rainier, OR. The town sat on the southern bank of the Columbia River. Longview, WA, sat on the northern bank.

Connecting the two riverbanks, the Lewis and Clark Bridge. Some 200 ft. below, the Columbia flows to the Pacific.

Bret told his stepfather he was going to jump off the Lewis and Clark. He planned to kill himself. Then he hung up.

Bret's mother and stepfather raced to the bridge in their car. But when they got there, they couldn't find him. In the darkness, they searched and searched, but there was no trace of the boy.

Bret had disappeared.

Standing on the Aurora Bridge on Oct. 17, 2007, Bret makes a call. He's just dialed a friend on his cell phone, but the friend doesn't pick up.

That's because the friend can't hear his phone ringing. The bus he's on is too noisy.

The phone call goes to voicemail, so Bret leaves a message.

I'm in trouble with the Department of Corrections...I was supposed to go wait in the lobby...I want you to know I'm not upset



The Aurora Bridge, seen from the west. Construction began in 1931. Since then, more than 230 have leapt to their deaths from the national historic landmark. It ranks as the nation's second most sought-out bridge for suicides by jumping. Photo collage by Joel Turner

BRET, Continued from Page 6

with you...I'm still your good friend...But I have to do this...I'm on a bridge.

Then Bret ends the call, never identifying the bridge as the Aurora Bridge.

And then — what? Does he look to his left, at the houses climbing up Queen Anne Hill? To the right, at the Fremont Baptist Church and the other buildings heading to Ballard? Does he feel his heart race standing so close to the edge?

What is he thinking? What does he do?

He decides to call another friend. He dials the number. It's 10:15 a.m.

The phone rings. The friend answers. Bret tells him he's on a bridge. About to jump.

Which bridge? the friend wonders. Where?

Roughly 130 feet below, down and off to the right of the Aurora Bridge, a construction crew excavates a site for a commercial space. Bret tells him, On a freeway, near a large crane.

A crane? Where? Where's the crane? Bret won't say.

The friend on the phone knows Bret has threatened to take his life before. But this morning, he sounds more despondent. Has he gone off his meds?

In the past, when Bret has threatened suicide, the friend convinced him to call his mother. He tries to get him to phone her now. Bret won't do it.

Maybe he can find Bret himself.

But where? A freeway, near a crane? Wait. There's an overpass to Interstate 5 right outside of the parole office. He hops in his car.

But that overpass sits in SODO, south of downtown. The Aurora Bridge lies north of the city's urban core.

His friend, without knowing it, heads out in the wrong direction.

But where? Where was Bret? Could he have —

On Nov. 7, 2000, near the Lewis and Clark Bridge that crosses the Columbia River, Bret's mother and stepfather looked and looked, but they found no trace of him. They decided to head back home, because maybe he might be — There. Up ahead. Riding a bike across one of the small bridges that traversed the Cowlitz River. Bret. He was alive. They drove him home. He mentioned what had occurred at the relative's house, but said not to worry, it was no big deal.

Which he probably believed until two days later, when the detective showed up at his house. Would Bret come down to the Kelso Police Station, so they could talk in private about what had happened two days prior? Bret thought that would be OK. His mother didn't object.

At the station, Bret read over his juvenile Miranda Warnings from a department-issued form. One informed him he could be tried as an adult. Bret signed the

He told his parents what had happened at the relative's house, but said not to worry, it was no big deal. Which he probably believed until two days later, when a detective showed up at his house.

paper. He agreed to speak, even without a lawyer present.

"I thought I was going to get arrested after what I did," Bret said. He was sweating so much he had to take off his outer shirt.

Tell me what happened, the detective said. So Bret told.

He'd gone to an older relative's house on Nov. 7, 2000, and found himself in the

bedroom of a younger relative, a four-year old girl. He didn't distinguish her as being a child, merely female. He removed the girl's tights and her diaper. Just as he raised his hand to the girl's—the older relative entered the bedroom. She screamed. He fled on his bike. But he hadn't touched the girl.

Oh. And he was supposed to be taking medication, but he hadn't been for a while. And he couldn't remember what the pills were for.

After recounting the story, Bret got worried. He didn't want to say anything that would put him in jail.

The detective wondered if Bret would like to write out a statement. He didn't. He wanted the detective's help.

So the detective settled on a "Q-n-A" format, writing "Q:", followed by a question. Next to "A:", Bret wrote, "Yes." Another question, another "Yes." A third question, a fourth. "Yes," "Yes."

In response to a fifth question, Bret wrote a sentence. To a sixth, Bret wrote another. Bret put his initials — "BW" — next to each answer and signed the statement. Then the detective gave him a ride home.

A short while later, the detective returned to Bret's house, accompanied by a sergeant. When they arrived, Bret had a bloody nose, and his eyes were red and watery. The boy had "gotten mouthy," his stepfather said, so he'd backhanded him.

Bloody nose or no, backhand or no, Bret was booked into Cowlitz County Jail for child molestation in the first degree. Bail was set at \$5,000.

In jail, Bret was an easy target. Other offenders, even those with special needs, picked on him. His vulnerability didn't surprise the jail's mental health official. He assessed Bret's thinking to be on a third- or fourth-grade level. For Bret's safety, the jail put him into a holding tank.

To ascertain his competency to stand trial, Bret was admitted to Western State

Hospital, a psychiatric institution. It was a week before his 18th birthday. The hospital determined Bret functioned in the "low average range of adult intelligence," while posing a moderate risk for committing future criminal behavior. "At this point, [Bret] Winch could not adequately take care of himself." Still, Western State found him competent.

In determining how to sentence Bret,

In jail, Bret proved to be an easy target. His vulnerability didn't surprise the jail's mental health official. He assessed Bret's thinking to be on a third- or fourth-grade level.

the court weighed two options. On one side of the scale, the standard range of confinement, ranging anywhere from 62 to 82 months. On the other, a program called SSOSA, shorthand for Special Sex Offender Sentencing Alternative.

The first state program of its kind when enacted in Washington in 1984, SSOSA is offered to some first-time sex offenders. Minimal jail time is required. Of course, the victim's future safety is taken into account. The same with the community. And the offender has to acknowledge remorse.

In exchange for the shorter sentence, the offender agrees to a list of offender-specific conditions, including paying for outside treatment. Break the conditions, suffer the consequences.

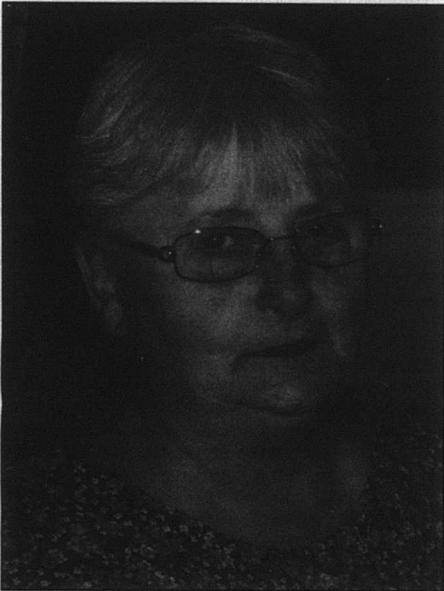
For Bret, corrections officials recommended option one, with a sentence of 72 months. The victim's adult relative who had caught Bret wanted the book

BRET, Continued from Page 7

thrown at him. "He should have to go to Texas, if I had my way," she told police. "They have the death penalty and are not afraid to use it the way liberals are here are."

Bret didn't want to admit guilt. After all, he'd told police he hadn't touched the girl. But, with a lawyer, he opted to plead guilty to first degree child molestation, with a request for SSOSA. The judge ruled in his favor, granting him a suspended 72-month sentence.

By the sentencing date, in early May 2001, Bret had already served close to six months. The judge deemed Bret free to leave, but his freedom hinged on three years of outpatient sex offender treat-



Nancy Erckenbrack, of Longview, WA, acted as a surrogate parent for Bret in 2001 after his child molestation conviction. Meeting him for the first time, she found him to be like a child. Photo by Rosette Royale

ment along with six years of community supervision. And he had to abide by a list of 20 conditions. Case closed.

But those conditions, Bret, 18 by then, kept breaking them.

The court had ordered he have no contact with the victim's family. But the victim's relatives happened to be his relatives, too. Less than a week out of jail, he interacted with a family member of the victim. One condition broken.

He was supposed to hold down a steady job, and he did. For a couple days. Unemployed, he couldn't afford treatment, and since his parents wouldn't pay, he stopped going. He'd broken a second.

He couldn't interact with minors. But kids his own age struck him as too mature, so when he saw some 12-year-old boys he knew playing basketball, well, he joined in. That broke a third.

At home, the battles with his stepfather raged and Bret got kicked out. Homeless, he broke into the concessions stand of a neighborhood park to spend the night. Police charged him with crimi-

nal trespass and theft. Still, the court didn't revoke his SSOSA.

A friend helped Bret obtain his own apartment and attended his court hearings. But unable to attend one hearing, the friend asked Nancy Erckenbrack if she'd go in his place, to offer moral support.

Nancy, along with her husband, Clinton, run the non-denominational Through Open Doors Ministry in the basement of their duplex. Bret's friend was a member. Even without knowing Bret's charge, Nancy agreed, showing up the next day.

Meeting Bret for the first time in the courtroom, she thought: Like a child. This boy is like a child. He held her hand.

Listening to all the rigamarole, the back and forth between Bret and the judge, Nancy began to surmise why he'd been charged. Still, she didn't sit in judgment. She knew God was merciful.

After the hearing, Bret came back to the Erckenbrack's house — just a few blocks away from his own apartment — and Nancy fixed him a sandwich. They sat and talked. "Then we and Bret were together almost every single day," says Nancy.

Bret attended their church services, where Nancy, 68, played the electric organ while Clinton, 64, preached to the congregants in the mismatched chairs placed in even rows. Bret sat down for meals afterward at the big maple table in their dining room upstairs. He even took to calling them Mom and Dad.

Not that he ever forgot his own mother. Oftentimes, he would express frustration to the Erckenbracks over not being with her more. But Bret, who held his tongue when it came to speaking ill of

others, never said anything really bad about his stepfather. "Except he could not stay or be at home because things weren't right," Nancy admits.

That's how he had wound up over at the Community House, an emergency shelter. He'd stayed there for a while in his late teens, after he'd been kicked out once, and met a young woman. A troubled young woman. Bret brought her to the Erckenbracks.

"I don't know if you've heard of people having demons," Nancy confides, "but she had them."

"They talked to her," nods Clinton.

Bret hoped the Erckenbracks could heal the young woman. So, while Clinton took Bret downstairs, Nancy sat right in front of the young woman, talking directly to her. Nancy specifically ignored the demons. That made them mad.

They screamed and hollered, but Nancy paid them no mind. Instead, she invoked the name of her Savior. In Jesus' name, come out of her. In Jesus' name, come out of her. In Jesus' name, in Jesus' name. Come out of her.

And...they did. The demons left. The girl looked at Nancy and smiled, her eyes bright.

Even Bret noticed it, telling them how the girl had literally changed. But that was Bret. "When someone was hurting," remembers Nancy, "he really had—" "Compassion," finishes Clinton.

Though Bret also may have been guided by an ulterior motive: that he could benefit from an exorcism of the type Nancy had

Because Bret heard things. Terrible things. Voices that told him to hurt himself.

performed. Because he heard things too. Terrible things. Though there's a difference between someone having demons and someone having a mental disorder.

"If someone is crippled in his mind," says Nancy, "they say he has demons."

Criticizing the person won't help. "They need someone to love them," Clinton offers.

So that's what they did for Bret. They loved him. And sat with him and prayed with him. Whatever they could do to help him counteract the voices he heard.

The ones that told him to harm himself.

Bret didn't tell Nancy and Clinton Erckenbrack about his treatments in psychiatric institutions when he was young. But he shared with them a diagnosis: schizophrenia.

A chronic disorder, schizophrenia disrupts how the brain functions. Thoughts become disorganized. Hallucinations alter reality. Behaviors shift. Confusion reigns. Bret's schizophrenia produced command hallucinations, which issue orders.

And he told the pastor-and-wife couple something else: he'd been diagnosed as having bipolar disorder.

Huge mood swings, moving from mania to depression and thoughts of suicide, characterize the disorder. But symptoms of bipolar disorder can often mimic or be confused with those of schizophrenia.

Taken together, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder amount to what clinicians call schizoaffective disorder. The ailment has no cure, but treatment, involving anti-psychotic medications, exist. Finding a psycho-pharmaceutical regimen a patient can adhere to, however, is a continual process of trial and error.

To suppress the illness that influenced his actions and decisions, he took a range of anti-psychotic medications, and in his basement apartment, he kept a calendar. Upon it, he'd write what meds to take and when. After he took a pill, he'd mark it off.

But sometimes, he couldn't recall the prescriptions or whether he'd taken them. That happens. It's not always easy to remember to take every pill when you're supposed to, and consistency with psychotropic meds didn't come easily to Bret.

Neither did keeping his appointments at a nearby outpatient mental health facility. By mid-February 2002, nine months after his sentencing, he had missed seven

out of 10 scheduled appointments. Another condition broken.

On the last day of February, Nancy Erckenbrack's phone rang. It was Bret. A scared Bret. He'd overslept and missed his required daily meeting with his parole officer. Now the PO was on his way to Bret's place. Would Nancy and Clinton come over too? Of course, no question.

The Erckenbracks arrived to find Bret's apartment spotless, like it always was. A few minutes later, the PO showed up, with a plainclothes officer. As he walked through the place, the PO kept an eye peeled for any violation. He found it in the garbage. Empty beer cans. Nancy hadn't even seen them.

The PO wondered how they got there. Bret explained that some friends had come over the night before. They brought beer, but Bret didn't touch a drop. It turned into a late night and after cleaning up, he went to bed, forgetting to set the alarm. That's why he missed his appointment.

One of Bret's conditions forbade him to drink alcohol. He swore to his PO he hadn't. His PO reminded him he couldn't possess it either.

Bret felt he hadn't done anything wrong. But when the PO looked back over the past year, he saw Bret break one condition after another. Now it was too late.

Bret was beside himself. Go quietly, Nancy told him, don't raise heck. They handcuffed him and took him to the jail.

Bret sat in a cell, awaiting his sentence. The jail was only a few blocks away and the Erckenbracks visited him as much as they could.

At the March 19, 2002, sentencing, the judge let Nancy speak on Bret's behalf. The boy is struggling with so many things, she told the judge, and he's trying to put his life right. The judge informed her Bret was a menace to society. Nancy had never heard such stuff. She and her husband, Clinton, spent weeks with the boy, so they knew.

"It wasn't that he was such a detriment

The judge informed Nancy Erckenbrack that Bret was a menace to society. She had never heard such stuff. "More on the whole," she said, "society was a menace to him."

to society," says Nancy. "More on the whole, society was a menace to him."

But the judge had the final word. He revoked Bret's sentencing alternative, reinstating the full sentence of 72 months, minus six months for time served.

The Erckenbracks tried to prepare him for what lay ahead. Bret didn't think he could handle it. But he had little choice, because three days later, on March 22, 2002, Bret put on an orange jumpsuit. Jail staff cuffed and shackled his ankles and wrists. And, aboard a white bus, he set off for a prison 85 miles away.

Bret's five and a half years in state prison had just begun. ■

To be continued...