

SHELL SHOCKED

The Heartbreak of Pizza Addiction

By Art Stevens

On the way to the rehab facility, I thought about all the events that had led up to my visiting Bill there.

Bill was a boyhood friend who had led a typically middle class, suburban existence. He was married, was the father of two fine young sons and had earned a good livelihood. What demonic forces broke the normal pattern of Bill's life, I wondered, and led to his being thrown by force into a rehab center to try to get his life together again?

What Bill went through can serve as a lesson to those who think it can't happen to them. Bill is one of the millions of Americans who suffer the indignity and despair of another kind of addiction. For you see, Bill is a pizzaholic.

There are countless public education programs dealing with the ills of cocaine, crack, heroin and alcohol addiction, but the public has scant knowledge of the deadly impact of pizza addiction. Poor Bill. He found out. This is his story.

"I was a normal kid like everyone else. It all started so innocently when I was nine years old. I was walking home from school one day when a funny looking man approached me. Since I was taught not to speak to strangers, I tried to walk around him. But suddenly a smell so wonderful filled my nostrils that my legs literally stopped in their tracks.

"You like that smell, kid?" he asked. I was speechless at first. That smell just seemed to grow more inviting and filled my whole head up.

"Yes, sir. What is it?"

"He knew he had me. From behind his back he exposed the source of that wonderfully compelling smell.

"This is pizza, kid. Why don't you try it?" he sneered with a wicked grin.

"No, I shouldn't," I stammered.

"Go on, kid. It won't do you any harm", he said.

"I did try it and from that day on my life changed. I didn't think I was hooked at first, but he waited for me everyday after school with a slice of pizza.

"As time went on, I began to haunt all the pizza parlors in town. The proprietors began to know me by my first name and rubbed their hands in glee when I approached their parlors. I pretended indifference, but they knew I was beginning to get hooked.

"What'll it be, kid, the usual?" they would chime.

"Yeah. One slice regular, please," I would mutter.

“The years passed. I went to college, got married, had a couple of kids and was climbing my way up the executive ladder. During all that time I thought I had my habit under control. I’d have my three slices at different times during the day and no one would be the wiser.

“Then one day, a job promotion I expected didn’t come through and it was the beginning of serious trouble for me. Disconsolate and disappointed, I stopped by one of my usual pizza haunts after work.

“‘The usual, Bill?’ the proprietor asked cheerfully.

“‘No, make it two slices today. And make it with extra cheese and sausage,’ I said.

“The proprietor stared at me.

“‘Bill, do you know what you’re doing?’

“‘What’s the matter? Isn’t my money good enough around here? I want two slices and I want them now. It’s my life,’ I shouted.

“The vicious cycle began. Everyday I increased my pizza consumption. I went from a purely social pizza eater to a raving pizzaholic. I knew the insides of every dingy pizza parlor in town. I soon lost my job because I’d be sneaking out four to five times a day for slice fixes.

“Soon I was hanging around the house eating sixty slices of pizza a day. There was a constant dank smell of parmesan cheese in the air.

“One evening my wife, who had been totally supportive of my rampaging habit, prepared a gourmet recipe of coq au vin. When she put it on the table my mind snapped. I picked up my plate and flung it against the wall.

“‘I don’t want this crap. I want pizza,’ I screamed.

“My poor wife burst into tears. The next day she packed some things and left with the children as I was wallowing in left over pizza crusts.

“Well, one thing led to another rapidly. I had run out of money and had to go begging at every pizza parlor for scraps. Soon they were throwing me out regularly.

“‘What you’re looking for is pie in the sky,’ they would taunt.

“I became desperate. I’d hang around back alleys and watch people leaving pizza parlors carrying slices. I would follow them and brandish a dough kneader and catch them unawares.

“‘Here, take my money,’ they would say.

“‘I don’t want your money. Just hand over that slice,’ I would sneer.

“One day, I got busted by an undercover crust buster as I tried to score big on a decoy slice he was carrying. They threw me immediately into this state rehab center to cheese out.

“At first I wouldn’t admit I was hooked on pizza. But they found out the truth when I couldn’t pass the pie lie test.

“They say I was suffering from pizza parlor pallor. Well, here I am, my life ruined, penniless and sliced out. What happened to me shouldn’t happen to a dog.”

I sat in long silence after Bill finished his tale of woe in the sparsely furnished visitors room of the state rehab center next to a sign that said “crust means bust.”

Tears welled up in my eyes as I hugged poor Bill and gave him the thumbs up sign.

“You’ll make it, Bill. I know you will.”

He gave me a wan smile as he was led away by a security guard while specks of parmesan cheese fell from his hair onto his tomato-stained shirt.

I left the facility as quickly as I could with the sinking feeling that Bill, like the millions of Americans who suffered the same dreaded addiction, would never lead a useful life again.

I sighed and looked at my watch. I panicked. I realized that I had been so absorbed in Bill’s story that it was well past the time for my ice cream fix.