

## P-C Watchdog report: Prison puts drunken driver on road to recovery



Post-Crescent photo by Dan Powers

**JOHN SCHAUS SITS IN HIS ONE-ROOM APARTMENT** Friday in Appleton. Schaus spent 6½ years in prison for his seventh and eighth drunken-driving offenses.

# Turning a corner

## Eight-time convicted drunken driver making amends

### State of Drinking



The P-C's ongoing coverage of Wisconsin's alcohol culture

The Post-Crescent has been closely examining the state's relationship with alcohol and its associated problems, including drunken driving, since 2008 when the newspaper and its sister sites in Gannett Wisconsin Media published a special series of stories on the topic. The reports, along with some by other state and national news organizations, provided a catalyst for changes to Wisconsin's OWI law that were approved in December and take effect this week. [www.postcrescent.com/stateofdrinking](http://www.postcrescent.com/stateofdrinking).

**SUNDAY'S STORY:** Police and experts aren't convinced new law is a cure-all for Wisconsin's problem with drunken driving.

**By Michael King**  
Post-Crescent staff writer

APPLETON — John Schaus knew it was wrong to drink and drive. But he did it anyway.

At least eight times. "This is how bad I was," he said. "I was on bail for my seventh (drunken-driving arrest) when I got picked up for my eighth."

He paid a steep price for his abysmal record. For nearly seven years, Schaus called a jail or prison cell his home because he refused to stop endangering the public by driving drunk.

Now, just over a year after being released from prison, Schaus, 47, is trying to make amends. He's telling his story in hopes of encouraging others in similar situations that it's not too late to turn their lives around.

A major turning point in his battle with

the bottle came at his July 2, 2003, sentencing in front of former Outagamie County Judge James Bayorgeon.

"He said I'm no better than somebody firing a gun down College Avenue at high noon," Schaus said. "I remembered saying to myself, 'Well, he's got a point.'"

Schaus, who bounced around and worked multiple jobs over the years, including a computer technician job where he made about \$45,000 a year, now works for decidedly less as a cashier at a Goodwill store in Darboy.

Still, he's happy for his new lease on life and believes he has found a home with Goodwill, the Menasha-based nonprofit that helps disadvantaged people get the needed education, training or job experience to overcome employment challenges.

See **DRUNKEN DRIVING**, A-4

## DRUNKEN DRIVING: 'Prison was the best thing that ever happened to me'

### From A-1

"Goodwill gave me an eight-week opportunity as a program participant through Community Circles of Support, which is a program for offenders getting out of prison," he said. Later, Goodwill offered him a seasonal job that has turned into a permanent position.

"He's doing real well," said Danel Burchbey, regional program coordinator for Circles of Support. "We're real proud of him."

### The onset of drinking

Schaus, a native of Union Grove, graduated from high school in 1980. Instead of going to college, his dad helped him get a job at a duck processing plant.

Schaus said he really didn't drink until he turned 18. Ironically, that's when his father quit drinking.

"He just decided one day that, 'I don't need to be spending this money on this anymore,'" Schaus recalled. "He ended up putting that money away and he bought a little cabin up north."

For Schaus, however, a culture of drinking ensued.

"Life revolved around

work, home and bars. I often told myself I want to live somewhere where, out of boredom, they did something other than drink," he said.

In 1987, while working at a Burger King, Schaus fell in love with his manager and they got married. They moved to Oshkosh in 1988 and he landed a job with a radio station.

That's when his drinking accelerated.

"I would go to work (as a radio news reporter) and still have alcohol on my breath. I ended up leaving before they fired me," he said.

"I bounced around from job to job because I was drinking. My drinking would get in the way of my job."

### Arrests accumulate

Court records indicate his first drunken-driving arrest came on Feb. 6, 1992. But Schaus said he has a few more convictions that aren't listed because records didn't carry over for years.

He said his first drunken-driving incident came in 1987 during a snowstorm, when he crossed the centerline and collided with a

truck. No one was injured.

"All told, I'm sure I've been picked up probably 11 times," he said.

Schaus said he never had a valid driver's license after 1987, but still drove regularly.

"I never went through the (court-ordered) alcohol assessment so I did not have my driver's license due to noncompliance," he said. "I thought, 'I'm a good driver. I'm never going to get caught. And, so what if I do?' I was in denial of everything."

That destructive attitude was not seriously addressed until nearly a decade later.

"I've been an alcoholic since I was 25," he said. "I would drink to excess. I wouldn't drink every day, but I would binge drink."

After a period of unchecked alcohol consumption, he woke up in the morning with the shakes, craving his next drink. If he ran out of alcohol, he became panicked.

While the couple never had children, the marriage survived until 2002. But Schaus said it really ended in 1998.

In 2001, he stayed with

friends in Boston and Seattle for a time before returning to Wisconsin the following year. He lived with his parents near Hurley for a few weeks until he was arrested on the warrants that landed him in prison.

### Fighting back

Today, Schaus describes his life as "very calm and serene."

Among the things that help him maintain his sobriety is a coin given to him by a friend he met at Alcoholic Anonymous. On one side it says, "Think before you drink" and "The time to call your sponsor is before, not after." The other side says: "Unselfishness, honesty, character, tolerance, easy does it."

Schaus always carries the coin in his pocket.

"My phone is full of phone numbers of people I can call," he said. "We help each other by talking, listening. We help each other through the rough times."

As time goes on, Schaus said he has fewer temptations to drink.

"If I ever get the chance to thank Judge Bayorgeon, I will," Schaus said. "If any-

body needed to be put away, it was me. I needed to go to prison."

Schaus said Bayorgeon's comment about "shooting a gun down College Avenue at high noon" has stayed with him.

"That stuck in my head. I remember his tone of voice," Schaus said. "He was right. I needed to be put away. Prison was the best thing that ever happened to me."

### Turning things around

Schaus was saddened to learn just a few months into his prison term that his father had died suddenly.

As the oldest of three children, Schaus, finally sober and thinking clearly, decided he needed to make amends.

He is paying off \$10,000 in fines from his drunken-driving convictions on a monthly basis.

"That \$10,000 is something I owe the community," he said. "That's a consequence of my actions. It may take me a while but they will get every penny of it. That's how prison, and being locked up, changed me."

He went through an intensive, four-month alcohol treatment program just be-

fore he got out of prison.

While he's no longer confined to a prison cell, his circle of activity is relatively limited. He leads a low-key, limited-mobility life.

"I'm either at home (in a downtown Appleton apartment), on the bus, at work, Harmony Cafe, a (AA) meeting or the library," Schaus said.

He is not sure if he will ever get a driver's license or a car.

But he is sure about passing along the message that drinking and driving is a perilous lifestyle.

"I work at Goodwill because you get to help people. (And) they helped me," Schaus said.

"Now hopefully I can help somebody else by working there. I also hope that somewhere along the way, people will get the message that drinking and driving is horrible. I never got that message until it was too late. Six-and-a-half years of my life were spent learning that lesson. I hope people can learn that lesson before going to prison."

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