

# Delivered from the desert

By Paul Laino

As Told to Jim Killam

That night in the Las Vegas desert, when I screamed to God for help, I was so far from the normal life I'd lived my first 30 years.

No one in my family was a church-goer. During my nine years in the Coast Guard, I made fun of the Christians there – even when I found out they were praying for me. Once I left the military, I pursued a real-estate career in Las Vegas, a booming market.

During a real-estate conference in Orlando, Fla., in 1998, a colleague and I struck up a conversation with a stranger on a bus. We ended up having dinner with him at an Olive Garden, and he talked to us about Jesus. For some reason, I believed him. When I got back to my hotel room, I prayed tearfully, "I need you, God."

I wasn't an atheist any more. But I didn't do anything with my new belief other than put it on the shelf. Life didn't change much.

A friend in the real-estate business introduced me to crystal methamphetamines in 2003, and I got hooked immediately. The meth was so cheap -- \$20 would last me two days – and it makes you insane. You're up for a week at a time, and then you sleep for three days straight. I dropped 90 pounds that first year, and my family put it together that I was on drugs. In 2004 I quit my job. My wife divorced me in November 2005, and left with our two kids for Illinois, where her family was.

Homeless, I lived in my truck around Las Vegas and Henderson. In April 2006, I lent the truck to some of my cronies ... and never saw it again. I was on the street and homeless, with only a backpack. I pitched a tent in the desert with other meth addicts, and started to learn how they survived. We'd steal stuff from Wal-Mart, then return it for the money,

I'd tried rehab twice, but without success. My appetite for meth was



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just too powerful.

This time, as I screamed out to God in the desert night, something changed. A calm came over me. That day, I'd snorted crystal meth, like I'd done just about every day for the past four years. It would be the last time.

I walked seven miles to McCarran Airport and, with my most recent \$700 military check, bought a one-way ticket to Chicago-O'Hare. Everything I owned was in my backpack, including the crumpled DD214 form from when I got out of the Coast Guard in 1999. That served as my only ID.

When I got to O'Hare, I wandered the corridors for hours. Near the bus stops, they announced over the intercom that a bus was leaving for Rockford.

"What area code is Rockford in?" I asked the counter attendant.

"Eight-one-five."

"That's the same as my kids." They lived with my ex-wife in Sycamore.

I had just enough money. I took the bus to Rockford, then spent that Friday night along a drainage ditch near Wal-Mart on East State. I was thinking of going to a VA center. I wandered into the Red Roof Inn and leafed through a phone book. And I found myself staring at an ad for the Rockford Rescue Mission.

I called my ex-wife in Sycamore. She agreed to drive up and meet me at the CherryVale Mall food court so I could see my kids. So I walked from the Red Roof Inn to the mall. Seeing my kids was like a great dream as we

ate and visited. And I asked her to drive me to the Mission.

I spent Saturday and Sunday night in the Men's Crisis bunkroom. On Monday morning, they woke us up at 5 a.m. and I went outside. I was napping in the back parking lot for a few hours, when a Mission staff member woke me up and talked to me about being in the program. I came back inside spoke to the Men's Crisis Supervisor, and was accepted into the Life Recovery Program. I thought to myself, "This is it."

With the help of God and the Mission my path has been clear. I realize who I am in Christ.

If the Rockford Rescue Mission wasn't there, who knows? It's a wonderful, protective environment where you can be removed from the world for a year and a half. Thanks to the great career training at the Mission, I have a job here in Rockford as an electronic technician, and I rent a house. My ex-wife trusts me now. I get to regularly see my daughter, Erin, who's 12, and my son, Jesse, who's 4.

Everything isn't perfect. Meth aged me. I'm 40, but I look a decade older.

From the moment God told me, "Go," I've had no hint of gambling or alcohol or drugs. Not even a craving. I know it doesn't work that way for everyone. I'm a task-oriented person, and I've been on task with this since that last night in Las Vegas. That was when I started not just believing in Jesus, but following Him.

It's not just a story in the Bible. Jesus rescues. 