

DYING FOR A DRINK

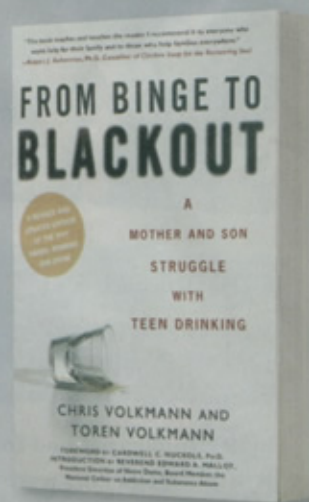
Toren Volkmann and his mother, Chris, tell the cautionary tale of his harrowing—and hidden—teenage alcoholism, complete with benders, beer bong and bogus IDs

In September 2003 Toren Volkmann, then 24 and a Peace Corps volunteer in Paraguay, phoned his parents in Olympia, Wash., with stunning news: He had been medevaced back to the States. No, he didn't have malaria, as mom Chris first feared: An alcoholic, he was detoxing in Washington, D.C., and headed for rehab.

Though Toren had been arrested twice in high school for underage drinking and had suffered blackouts in college, his family—brothers Tanler, 30, and Tyson, 28, Chris, 58, and Toren's dad, Don, also 58—couldn't believe what they were hearing. "The last thing we wanted to do was admit that he had a drinking problem," Chris says. "I think, deep down, we had been afraid of that. It's important for parents not to look at teen drinking as just a rite of passage."

When the family was forced to face reality, "we were scared to death," remembers Don, an anesthesiologist. Now Chris, a former teacher, and Toren share their story in their new book, *From Binge to Blackout*, and lecture about the dangers of teen drinking—and of denial. How could the Volkmanns have missed Toren's distress? They didn't. "The mistake we made was presuming we could handle it," says Chris. They spoke with PEOPLE's Ken Lee about their journey.

TOREN: People always ask why I started to drink. At the time all I knew was that I was out to have fun. Most of my friends were above-average athletes, reasonable students. We thought we just had more fun because we were getting messed up.



"A lot of parents don't realize how serious teen drinking is," says Chris Volkmann (with Toren near the family home in Olympia, Wash.).



A PERFECT SON?



A DOUBLE LIFE Though Toren (right, with bottle, in '98 with pal Ryan Clintworth) began drinking at 14, his family (top, from left, brothers Tyson and Tanler and parents Don and Chris, with Toren in July) believed he was normal.



PARTY BOY

In 1995 police nabbed Toren at a party where underage kids were drinking. He was slapped with the first of three MIP (minor in possession of alcohol) citations.

CHRIS: Don and I were alarmed. We were casual drinkers and had talked to our sons about moderation, binge drinking, about not taking risks. We grounded Toren, limited his TV and phone use and made him volunteer to help coach a youth soccer league. But two months later Toren came home so drunk that Don videotaped him, to play it back when he sobered up.

TOREN: I was an alcoholic from the beginning. I always drank to get hammered. Only in rehab did I realize that it was genetically programmed: I'd known Dad's brother had died at 31 from snorting heroin while bingeing on alcohol. It was one of the things my folks talked about when they warned me about drinking. In rehab I learned from my dad when he wrote me a letter that many of his relatives also had drinking problems.

Since high school my friends and I could always get ice beer and malt liquor. We'd get someone older to buy it or we'd steal from parents. By my senior year I had a fake ID.

By 1998 Toren had been thrown off the soccer, football and swim teams (which had no-tolerance rules on alcohol). Alarmed, Chris and Don bought a Breathalyzer.

TOREN: I just lied my way through

everything. An adolescent's biggest weapon is his parents' denial.

CHRIS: We tried to intervene in our own way by checking on him constantly and being very strict. We didn't realize we needed the help of a professional. After each incident, we thought Toren had finally wised up. And he was still a joy—a respectful kid who talked about social injustice, world causes, sonnets.

Toren graduated with a 3.63 GPA in June of '98; that fall, he entered the University of San Diego.

TOREN: My freshman year was one big celebration in a bottle, though I always made a point of making it to class and doing well. I tried LSD, coke, ecstasy. But

IS YOUR TEEN DRINKING?

Even sporadic binge drinking may cause permanent brain damage in teens. Here, according to Chris Volkmann and experts, are clues to alcohol abuse:

- 1 Chewing gum or eating candy to mask alcohol breath
- 2 Borrowing more and more money
- 3 Persisting with drunken escapades, even after being caught
- 4 Being secretive about plans
- 5 Going to friends' houses instead of inviting kids home
- 6 Quitting teams or activities

I always came back to alcohol. In my sophomore year, I started getting the shakes. Throughout college, I'd drink weekends; on Sunday, sobering up was hell.

While in college Toren also racked up three arrests for public drunkenness and was evicted for throwing wild parties. A university official had sent him to AA meetings, but Chris and Don knew nothing, since the school wasn't required to alert them. When he graduated in '02, his parents were still unaware of his bingeing. Then, after he went to Paraguay in January '03, his life began to change.

TOREN: I found serenity being out in the country with some of the warmest people I have ever encountered. In my little community, I was trying to reinvent myself as a normal person. When I saw other volunteers in Asunción, I tried to be a social drinker, but I was lying to myself. In September '03 I had an emotional breakdown at a conference there. I was hiding drinks and was ashamed for the first time. Finally I found myself in the Peace Corps medical office. I was given Valium and put in a hotel room to begin detoxing.

After 30 days in rehab, Toren entered a Florida halfway house in October 2003.

CHRIS: Instantly our relationship got better. Before, there was always a fog of things he was trying to hide from us. Even though it was painful, it was exhilarating to know the truth.

Sober for three years, Toren now lives in San Diego, where he is a songwriter.

TOREN: My biggest struggle has been reestablishing my identity. It's still hard for me to believe I was addicted to alcohol. But what alcohol has taken from me, I've finally taken back.

CHRIS: Our being in a position to help other families is a gift. Every time I hear about a college kid who dies from bingeing, I think, That could've been my son.

By Susan Schindehette. Ken Lee in Los Angeles