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Program helps woman kick drinking habit

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"The shackle" saved her life.

Jessica Becker used to drink to relax. Now she plays the Sims video game. But for nearly 10 years she was an alcoholic who could manage to go to work drunk.

A judge gave her a choice when she received a third DUI this year -- to try to stop drinking or go to jail.

"By that time the drinking was destructive and heavy," she said. "Without that bracelet I wouldn't have quit in Marysville (prison) by now. This really is my last chance."

In six months Becker worked to break free of alcoholism, and she is determined to keep it that way. She is supported by a loving family and the Portage County Municipal Court's Secure Continuous Remote Alcohol Monitoring program.

Municipal court judges in Portage County have the ability to offer repeat drunken driving offenders the choice to wear a SCRAM unit or participate in the SCRAM program.

Those who choose the program have an electronic bracelet securely fastened to their ankles. The bracelet monitors blood alcohol content 24 hours a day, seven days a week and reports the results to the county's adult probation department.

Portage County has 50 SCRAM units and 49 of those units are in use. The systems are so sensitive they can detect small amounts of alcohol found in colognes, deodorants and other hygiene products.

"I was really terrified when they put it on because ... I didn't know what my recreation would be," Becker said. "It was hard to quit because booze is your confidant. It never leaves. Even though it's destructive it's still a means of escape, the pain, the hurt."

Despite her initial fears, Becker did so well her probation officers offered to take off her SCRAM unit twice. She declined. Even though she had to pay the cost of \$13 a day to wear the bracelet she still needed a curfew to keep her sober.

This thin, 28-year-old retains her youthful beauty, but her darting eyes conceal years of hard life. A scar on her forehead, one of the few visible, is the remnant of a violent situation with a drunken man. Her curly, strawberry blonde hair and light complexion she compliments with gold jewelry -- four necklaces, four earrings (two silver), a handfitted ring and a tiny stud in her nose.

The choice to be monitored by the county came easy to her. "I'm not a jail-type girl," she said.

Her bracelet finally came off Nov. 14. So does she feel secure in her sobriety?

"Today, yes," she said strongly. But, "It goes day by day. Today is a busy day, so I have no room to think have the urge I have people I can call."

First and foremost are her grandparents, whom she lives with in Streetsboro. Her brothers and sisters are own ways, but her niece is most important to her.

"If I screw up again my sister won't let me see her," she said. So she has created mechanisms to keep her trouble. She can watch her friends drink because it reminds her of what she used to look like.

"Drinking makes me ugly," she said. She attends counseling at Townhall II in Kent even though she does will start intensive outpatient treatment there. And she's still on probation, so she can have "the shackle"] ankle up until May.

Becker is hopeful to start again at the Cleveland Institute to finish her studies in medical assisting. She w to school and maybe get a degree in social services, so she can help people like herself.

She thinks the SCRAM unit helped straighten her life out and believes it can do the same for others.

"People have to be sincere in wearing the bracelet," she said. "You can't just wear it because the court say trained yourself to be a drinker, now you have to train yourself not to drink."