

Name: **Sandy Y.**

City, State: **Morgantown, WV**

Age: **56**

Occupation: **Teacher**

Her Story: **Fourth grade teacher gets taught a life lesson she'll never forget**



SANDY'S FIRST PERSON ACCOUNT OF HER STORY

People come to gambling for different reasons, beginning with the entertainment aspect. And those of us who have developed an addiction may have started just that way. But then for different reasons the entertainment goes astray, and in my case it became a distraction – an ability to hide, relax and numb myself to the challenges of everyday life.

I had a great childhood. I grew up here in Morgantown and after the family moved on, I stayed here to teach school and raise my daughter, Erin. Being a WV teacher, I have always had to watch my finances and work extra jobs to get my daughter through college and have a little extra money.

I had never gambled ...ever, until I took a trip to Reno with my mom to visit my Aunt and Uncle. They live in Reno and part of their entertainment is to go to the Peppermill and gamble. This was about 4 years ago. I saved a little money to play and that was all I spent.

Then over the next few years I would visit Atlantic City on the way to my sister Nancy's in Cape Cod or stop off at Foxwood, once, for an hour to check it out.

Somewhere in the midst of these years my step-dad died of cancer and my father died suddenly. I helped the family out in both situations by helping plan the funerals and speaking at the services.

Over the next few years my mom had a broken leg, a blocked artery and surgery for gall bladder and a perforated hernia. And as a relaxation activity from school and running up and down the road to Charleston, WV, I walked into one of the little casinos here in Morgantown. It wasn't hard...it was over on University Ave., as are many, many other little gambling spots.

These video poker machines started showing up in 2000 and can now be found in 99 local establishments. This information can be found on the WV Lottery website as well as the financial earnings and who owns those places.

I started on the weekends after returning from my mom's and would just play for an hour and go home, always limiting the amount of money I spent to \$20 to \$40. Then I started stopping in during the spring of 2004 after school and on the weekends I would drive around and visit some of the other places here in Morgantown and Westover

My big fall into the pit came with the onset of summer 2004. I started out by visiting some of the local places each day. I actually took a class that lasted a week in the middle of all of this and at this point I would like to say that the gambling didn't interfere at all with my school responsibilities. I kept this as an after school and weekend activity.

I started playing for fun, a chance to relax, visit with new people who had similar interests. We discussed wins and losses, family, travel, our health. Everything! It was so much fun. But soon I was out of control.

I started going to the bowling alley everyday. I would have breakfast, get dressed and the excitement in my heart would begin. Would I win today? Could this be the day?

Even now as I think about it, I get excited. I am one of those folks who didn't win much. I did win \$300. one day and \$900.00 on another day but even though I filled out a deposit slip, I returned to the gambling establishments and lost that money. I went from gambling just \$40.00 to sometimes \$300.00. I went through my savings, sold coins and jewelry, took out a small loan to pay off my credit cards and spent that money and then began to use a pin number to take money out on my Discover Card. The company called me several times to find out if in fact I was taking the money out or had my card been stolen. I told the guy that it was me and I proceeded to take out the limit on my card.

As the middle of August came, I realized that the only money I had left was the money that I had put away in the credit union for the 2 summer months that I didn't get paid. So I started using it.

All the while, I was denying to my friends and family that I had a problem. I would put a smile on my face and laugh it off. I took one more loan out and by the time the school year started I had \$.47 left in my pocket and 1 credit card that I had not touched.

Your mind goes numb. You don't think about how much you have spent or you just try to ignore the mounting debt. It becomes a battle of wills. Ignoring what you know is happening to you and at the same time rationalizing that it will be fine and that you are still in control.

During this summer of 2004 I still called my mom each night as we had done for years. But sometimes I would be a little late or would run home from the bowling alley and then go back as soon as finished my call. To me, at the time, this was quite exciting. Like being a child and getting away with something. I had only been talking to my sister about once a week.

But finally, at my lowest point, August 30th.....Nancy asked me if I was mad at her because I had not gone to visit her. That was my night to tell. I spilled my guts and cried and cried. She encouraged me to get help. I gambled one more day and on the evening of Sept. 2, I called the Gamblers Hotline and talked to Steve Burton. For what seemed like 2 hours he calmed me down, gave me information and finally after much cajoling got me to accept an appointment with a counselor. That was the beginning of my recovery and the acceptance of my gambling addiction.

Friday evening, Sept 3rd, I met with my counselor, Jane Spraggins for 2 hours. She asked questions and let me talk and cry and then we began working on practice sheets that made me take a long hard look at my addiction. We went through a series of questions that helped me identify the severity of my compulsive gambling and let me see how through a series of life's challenges, I had used the gambling as an escape. I met with Jane 4 days later and we continued to delve into my reasons for gambling and also discussed money management. For several months following we met each week and as my confidence grew and I remained clean I began to recover the joy in my life and the fog began to lift.

Nancy and her fiancé Tim called me every night as they have continued to this day. They call themselves the SST (the Sandy Support Team). I will be forever grateful to them for their love and support.

As a way to replace my gambling I decided to go walking with my friend Sandy Brown. I was not going to divulge my secret but on our first lap around the Coliseum I told her my story. What a friendship we have and she kept my secret until I started to come out to my friends.

There was one more very important part of my recovery and that was GA-Gamblers Anonymous. Jane had encouraged me to go to meetings as another integral part of recovery but I kept putting it off. I finally went to Stonewall Jackson resort where a counselors' conference was being held and they were having a meeting. I went with a fellow member and experienced

my first meeting Sept. 22, 2004. An important guest speaker was Arnie Wexler and his wife Shelia. He discussed his path to recovery and the support his wife had made to his remaining clean. They are a wonderful older couple, from New York, (I think) and they speak all over the US. In January a very involved member of GA (Jane- different from my counselor) started a group here in Morgantown and I have participated in that group each week.

The power of GA is the support. We are all in the same boat although circumstances and stories are all very different. The one thing we all have in common is an inability to control our gambling. As one of our members said – Gambling is an inadequate or inappropriate response to a life situation. Together we acknowledge that we are powerless over gambling..... But with the support of others and taking one day at a time and sometimes one hour at a time, we are regaining our lives and finding better ways to cope with a very insidious addiction.

I have now been clean for over a year. I have money in my saving account. I can shop, a little bit. Life is good, I am happy, I have found my joy once again.

The Hotline is invaluable. They provide a shoulder to cry on but more importantly advice on help. If you let them, they will set up a counselor, send a packet of information and advise you on the location of GA meetings. I will always be grateful to the Hotline and the supportive staff that works there. I enjoyed the follow-up calls at 6 months and 1 year and I hope that I will be able to speak to them over the years.

Disclaimer: the above story appears in its original form and has not been edited for content. The above story does not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of The National Council on Problem Gambling.