

## Interview Q&A

*A Conversation with co-Authors Chris Volkmann and Toren Volkmann*

### ***Our Drink- Detoxing the Perfect Family***

[www.OurDrink.com](http://www.OurDrink.com)

#### **1. What is your book about?**

**Toren-** Drinking. Demystifying alcoholism. The reality of addiction. The painful process.

**Chris-** *Our Drink* reveals how our family mixed into the mainstream of alcohol culture, how our 23-year-old son Toren confessed to being an alcoholic, and how we dealt with the consequences. It tells how our family missed the signs of Toren's addiction and describes the agony of the ensuing discovery. I overlooked my son's symptoms, thinking since he graduated from college with only a few slip-ups, that he was not only okay, but successful! I represent the relieved, smiling parents attending graduation with no clue their kids are part of a not-so-hidden epidemic.

#### **2. How have your friends and family reacted to the subsequent creation and release of *Our Drink*?**

**Toren-** My friends and family have been very supportive. It's all turned into such a positive experience. When I first came home from the Peace Corps and went into rehab I thought my life was ending.

**Chris-** Many felt our book should be anonymous---that we should protect ourselves. But we have come to realize that alcoholism is not a private disease. People have requested to read the book even before its release. They always know someone it could help.

#### **3. Whose idea was the book and why did you write it?**

**Toren-** After I sent a 'shocking' journal entry (my first chapter) to my parents, the whole ball got rolling. The book and the vision was really my mom's, though. I just caused all the problems we wrote about.

**Chris-** The idea unfolded while Toren was in rehab. First of all, the journal writing sent by Toren had exploded in our faces. In the meantime, I was pouring out my own reactions on paper. When I asked Toren what he thought about putting something together, he said we should try it. It had to be.

#### **4. How can someone graduate from college with success and have this happen?**

**Toren-** How do I really answer that in a short sentence? It's easy to look the other way. Someone with an alcohol problem can find many ways to mask it. But as I found out, eventually it was too much to handle and I couldn't fake 'normal' any more. So, yeah, I made it through college, but the disease was always with me and worsening. Read the book.

**Chris-** Some people are remarkable actors. It took a lot of deception on Toren's part to hide his disease from us. There was no one more shocked than me. And, to be honest, we were too naïve even though we thought we had done everything right. The "Perfect" Family.

**5. Over the course of writing the book, how has the relationship between mom and son changed or been affected?**

**Toren-** I think we are very close, and much closer even now. If I go more than a day or two without talking to my mom it feels like a year. We did the entire book by phone and e-mail so we constantly checked in. It's been such a good way to figure this out, and to relate what worked or didn't work over the years. We have had a lot of fun doing this, somehow.

**Chris-** I feel closer to Toren than at anytime in my life. We have gone over everything, and now there remains only honesty and the desire to make a better life for our entire family.

**6. What are the advantages of having two authors? Are there disadvantages?**

**Toren-** The reader gets two different perspectives and sees how both people endured the events and changes.....it's like experiencing two cross-sections of an agonizing process. With two authors, there is more to relate to and hopefully learn from. The disadvantage is that there aren't three versions.

**Chris-** Having two authors affords differing views of a life story. And interestingly, we appear to have lived in the same family at the same time with two contradictory interpretations. My memory did not always record events accurately, I have discovered. Sometimes I did not know what my son was doing at all. (We used two different fonts in the book to differentiate our voices.) In the end, it turned out to be two times as fun. As far as the disadvantages of having two authors, it necessitated a lot of e-mail and phone calls.

**7. How did you feel the first time you read the other's writing? Were there any parts you particularly did/did not like?**

**Toren-** It was fascinating to see what came out on my mom's side. At times it was brutal to be dragged through certain events again and to see how damaging some of my behaviors were...but overall, I like how she dynamically and honestly sheds light on our story. So read it.

**Chris-** The first time I read Toren's writing I felt as though I had been shot in the head, my lungs ripped out, and my equilibrium extracted. I was devastated. It was tough to read about Toren's withdrawals and his hidden abuse.

**8. What was the hardest part about writing the book?**

**Toren-** Making an ending. It can never adequately end. There is no dessert or tidbit of information or any event

that makes a fair conclusion. This is a life-long battle that will always be with anyone facing the disease of alcoholism.

**Chris-** The hardest part about writing the book was remaining honest. At times I wanted to fudge, to make it sound like what my mother would like to read about her offspring. I had a difficult time really putting it out there. I squirmed a lot.

**9. What persons or type of person is the book aimed at?**

**Toren-** This book is for anyone who knows 'someone else' with a drinking problem. Or anyone who drinks heavily or is worried about alcoholism. This book is for anyone who has alcoholism in the family. This book can be for teens who want something interesting to read, a book that may also inform them about the reality of alcohol. This book is for anyone who is looking for answers about drinking, anyone looking for help, or in search of hope.

**Chris-** Our Drink is written for people who care about their families, who wish to present a balanced and reasonable approach to alcohol consumption. It also reaches out to the teen who may be questioning his or her drinking style. Since binge drinking is the most widespread health problem on college campuses in the USA, it should be informative to both college students and their parents.

**10. Who do you think should read this book if you could reach one demographic?**

**Toren-** Kids in high school who are thinking about college, or maybe anyone about to finish high school, period. There is a lot we don't understand about alcoholism.

**Chris-** Eighteen-year-olds and their parents.

**11. What do you hope that a reader your age can get out of this book?**

**Toren-** I hope that readers my age (24) can learn how to recognize indicators of alcoholism more readily and that they realize there is hope, that problematic drinking does not have to go on, nor does the suffering. Asking for help is cool and sobriety is fun and hip!!!

**Chris-** I hope a reader my age (parents) will find solace in his/her parenting decisions, and encouragement to continue setting standards and reaching out to our young people who are facing serious choices in a pro-alcohol culture. Since problem drinking is no longer a hidden problem and fake ID's can be ordered on the Internet, parents need to engage kids in discussion and agree about acceptable behavior. It's hard work to communicate with our kids, but with current research coming out about adolescent brains and the severe damage caused by underage drinking, every family must talk about this together.

**12. How often did the two of you meet together in person when working on *Our Drink*? Were any of your writing techniques unusual?**

**Toren-** During the course of the writing we really only got to meet three times because of our geographical separation. We did most of the corresponding by e-mail and with attachments. LOTS of phone calls.

Our writing techniques were interesting because for the most part the sections were written independently and later fused into one storyline. For this reason they overlap in certain areas and expand on other subjects, complimenting each other.

**Chris-** We met only three different times while writing the book. Most of Toren's portion was written in a public library, then e-mailed to me. He was in Florida and I was in Washington State. We talked for hours on the phone, and then at the end, we read the whole manuscript orally to one another when I visited him in Florida. It was a fabulous but heart-breaking experience.

### **13. What is your hope for *Our Drink* overall?**

**Toren-** I hope the book helps a lot of people and gives them something to think about, even some enjoyment.

**Chris-** My hope is that *Our Drink* will open a flood of conversation about every person's alcohol consumption, the alcohol industry, and the nation's complicity in soft-pedaling the side-effects of heavy drinking. Alcohol is heavily targeted to adolescents and young adults---particularly young men-- through advertising and peer pressure. The alcohol lobby is powerful; using inflation-adjusted dollars, alcoholic beverages today cost less than they did in 1951 whereas the cost of milk has quadrupled. [*A Nation Under the Influence*, Peterson/Nisenholz/Robinson, 2003, p. 14].

### **14. How has this experience of writing *Our Drink* changed your behavior with alcohol?**

**Toren-** I don't drink. I work a program of recovery and no longer suffer like I did those last years of drinking. I am much more aware of how much other people drink now too, whether I like it or not. I'm still crazy, just sober.

**Chris-** I now look at my third glass of wine in a different way. Alcohol has lost its glamour. Suddenly I realize that the price of drinking is more than a tag on the bottle. It costs all of society.

### **15. What makes *Our Drink* unique?**

**Toren-** It's unique because you get the perspective from the parent *and* the kid as the story reveals itself. *Our Drink* also offers a lot of technical information, discusses missteps and offers ideas and options for preventing such outcomes. It is honest and lets the reader into the reality of alcoholism...cunning, baffling, and powerful.

**Chris-** *Our Drink* provides the dark and the light of alcohol consumption. We aren't here to tell people what to do. But we hope they will be aware of their choices and the effects. It may be unusual to have a parent and son in agreement about this.

**16. On your Website [www.OurDrink.com](http://www.OurDrink.com) you offer workshops. What are they like?**

**Toren-** Our workshops offer a platform for us to present and address some of the key ideas described in *Our Drink*: information about the disease of alcoholism, issues of alcohol and society, heavy drinking on college campuses and what we think may be part of the solution to a better understanding and awareness.

**Chris-** Our mission is to educate youth and families about alcohol choices and the consequences of heavy drinking. Each workshop is highly personalized to fit the needs of the persons attending. We are able to evenly discuss alcohol issues (whereas parents and teens frequently disagree) because we have been there already. Our workshops cater to teens, parents, high school assemblies, college student/parent orientation weekends and community groups.

**17. What can *Our Drink* offer to families? To teens?**

**Toren-** *Our drink* offers information and personal insight on the effects of alcoholism. More importantly it shows that there is hope and help and that no one has to suffer.

**Chris-** *Our Drink* offers a chance to discuss alcohol in a non-punitive situation, the chance to look at current research through someone else's experience. We also offer the aid of a practical gauge for measuring alcohol information passed on in the family. *Our Drink's Communication Gauge* (found in the book) is a tool to see whether teens and families have sufficiently been informed about vital alcohol information.

**18. Where did you grow up and get your education? How do you think that has influenced the outcome of *Our Drink*?**

**Toren-** I grew up in Washington State and received my education in the Olympia Public Schools. Many of my first problems with alcohol arose during those times and it deeply impacted my activities, as well as my interaction with my parents and other staff at school. Some of the book talks about this time period.

**Chris-** I grew up in a small town in central Washington in the 50s and 60s, quite ignorant of alcohol's progressive damage. I was the perfect self-righteous parent, thinking my child would be immune to the effects of heavy drinking.

**19. Is there backing by colleges and universities for dealing with the problems discussed in *Our Drink*?**

**Toren-** It's hard to know. Many universities foster a lot of these problems but want to turn their heads, while

other schools seem to want to take more of a stance. The number of alcohol problems is increasing as is the amount of heavy drinking in our culture, so it should be interesting.

**Chris-** The surgeon general has set the goal of reducing college binge drinking by 50 percent by the year 2010. Many colleges are attempting to intervene earlier when student drinking problems are perceived. *The federal government acknowledges that underage drinking is the single biggest drug problem facing adolescents today.* However, little money is spent to warn teenagers about the dangers of drinking because of the Big Alcohol lobby. Colleges and universities face an uphill battle.

**20. Many youth today are drinking heavily. And so are their parents. Whose problem is it and what can be done about it?**

**Toren-** Nothing necessarily needs to be done about people's drinking. BUT open communication and awareness can be increased regarding the impact of heavy drinking on ALL people, especially adolescents. People can become more informed about addiction, the disease process, and can learn to live with the disease instead of dying from it.

**Chris-** Recent research indicates that even weekend social drinkers (grownups) face brain damage by chronic heavy drinking. As a nation, we are consuming more alcohol every year. It's our problem, *Our Drink*, and we are the people who can adjust attitudes and behaviors. Learning about alcohol and its effects is the best way to face the facts.

**21. What do you like to do when you aren't promoting *Our Drink*?**

**Toren-** Get a daily dose of vitamin Fun and frequent the local rock and roll venues in nearby towns.

**Chris-** I use up more than my share of words, writing writing writing. I perform with a symphony, appreciate my family and friends, and surprise myself as often as possible.

**22. What's next for you?**

**Toren-** Buy some peanut butter, do my laundry, check my e-mail.

**Chris-** There's always something to contemplate, something to chase after, and something I thought about yesterday but can't recall today.

*Our Drink: Detoxing the Perfect Family* portrays the choking of an adolescent by binge drinking and alcohol addiction. Toren and his Perfect Family drag this drunken party straight into American homes in commonplace nonchalance, mislabeled under the term "success."

- Toren's has been a life no mother wants revealed yet others would find exhilarating and shockingly sensational. But there's a clincher: it doesn't work. It doesn't work for the cool guy from the cool family and it might not work for so many others who will read the book.
- Invincible Toren had a college diploma, a competitive spot in South America with the Peace Corps, spoke three languages, and could charm his way around the world. He didn't think that drug and alcohol information applied to him. And the family missed it. If this family is the average family, and the addicted son represents a flourishing college graduate, then there must be millions more like them....and tens of thousands more who are or will be facing alcoholism.
- The voice of the story switches between mother and son to provide a dynamic combination of inner monologue, narration and alcohol information. This patchwork disarms the reader by its honesty. *Our Drink* offers a genuine picture of what hard drinking does to a young man, a family, a society.
- The story could take place in any cul-de-sac; it's one that *is* happening in epidemic form. The key to dealing with alcoholism isn't just a pile of scientific data on drinking and addiction--it's all the relevant statistics cultivated in the Petri dish of the family. That's why it's *Our Drink*. It's owned by all of us.
- It's not just the Perfect Family's opinion about itself. It's what researchers are saying about our youth, our family, our college campuses and the drinking culture. Binge drinking is the most widespread health problem on college campuses in the USA [College Alcohol Study, 2002]

### Excerpts

Toren Volkmann states, *"I can't imagine anyone bearing this type of internal hell that I feel as a result of hard drinking and continuing on without letting others know. How did I not ever hear about this side of alcohol and withdrawal? I never envisioned I'd be the 'I Told You So' poster boy for the DARE Program."* He talks from the frenzy of a kid who thought himself indestructible. *"I used to be able to handle the worst of hangovers, wear it like a soldier wore a uniform, or drink it off. I could deal with hellacious sleeplessness from drinking for a day or through the night, maybe ending up in some random bed and still charging through class, ball practice or family happenings like the dark angel that I was. . .even the torrential blackouts that would be reported or random acts of split personality."*

Chris Volkmann overlooked her son's symptoms, thinking since he graduated from college with only a few slip-ups, that he was not only okay, but successful! She represents the relieved, smiling parents attending graduation with no clue their kids are part of a not-so-hidden epidemic. *"When I left for the market earlier today, my son was living in South America working for the Peace Corps. By the time I returned home to put the groceries away, he'd become an alcoholic headed for rehab. So what happened between the produce aisle and my driveway?"* Chris reveals what every parent thinks but cannot say.

*As a national goal, the U.S. surgeon general has established a 50-percent reduction in college binge drinking by the year 2010*

### **Bios**

Author **Chris Volkmann**, a former classroom teacher, a recipient of the 2001 Washington State Artist Trust GAP Literary Grant, lives in Olympia, Washington. Chris stepped away from her career to parent three sons. Once thinking herself a successful mother, she now restirs the pot of family-binding glue.

Co-author **Toren Volkmann** (BA in psychology, University of San Diego, former Peace Corps Volunteer) grips the story with the bite of an addict's hidden desperation. His edgy writing wanders within itself, giving the reader the feeling of chaos and inner turmoil behind a demeanor of courage. Toren currently lives one day at a time in New York City after successfully completing six months residence in a Florida halfway house.