

A Vietnam Veteran Fights To Remain Free of Drugs

By KARI HASKELL

Pain relief. It can be found in a doctor's prescription, or as easily on some of New York's streets.

For Arnold McDonald, 57, both types of relief were tempting. His dependence on drugs began more than 30 years ago when his brother was killed, and it worsened when he was injured on the job.

He no longer takes medications for two herniated disks resulting from an on-the-job accident.

"I still have pain, a lot of pain," said Mr. McDonald, a father of five. "I just deal with it."

In recovery from 23 years of addiction, he lives with the pain because he knows that one pill or one injection could destroy 12 years of being drug free.

A relapse could also mean losing his daughters: Sheena, 19; Nicole, 15; Regina, 13; Mariah, 12; and Dominique, 8 -- not to mention Sheena's daughter, Xyonia Gaitling-McDonald, who was born in April.

"It comes to a point where you hit a wall; my wall was my kids," said Mr. McDonald, in his living room in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn.

For 15 years, he worked for the city in sewage maintenance, making \$30,000 a year. An accident while on a routine assignment at a wastewater treatment plant in Red Hook in 1993 ended his employment. He and a partner were lifting a heavy iron grate to descend into the sewage system, he said. When his counterpart lost hold of the lid, it plunged below the lip into the manhole. Mr. McDonald maintained his hold, but the weight jarred him forward, wrenching his back.

The prescribed medications relieved the pain from constant pressure on his spinal cord. When the pills wore off, heroin eased the pain, he said. His stocky frame and large biceps are a scarred canvas of needle marks.

Mr. McDonald's casual drug use began in Vietnam, where he and his twin brother, Ronald, were both stationed. His brother's death there started a destructive pattern. When any crisis arose, he turned to drugs. "Heroin, acid, I did it," he said.

After his accident, Mr. McDonald, his wife and the girls were living with his mother. What made the family's situation worse, Mr. McDonald said, was that his wife, Sheila, had long shared his dependence on drugs.

He felt a sense of helplessness in not being able to help his children. "I'd be at



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Arnold and Dominique McDonald at their home in Bedford-Stuyvesant. The Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service has aided his family.

home and the girls would be crying," he said. "I couldn't do anything about it."

After repeatedly seeing their young faces dripping with tears, he entered treatment in 1994. But he did not take it seriously until a caseworker from the Administration of Children's Services made an unannounced visit and found evidence of drug use in the home, Mr. McDonald said. His children were put in the custody of his mother.

"I was angry at the time," he said, "but it was exactly what I needed."

"With drugs you always feel you have control over whatever you are using," he said. "The funny part is it has control over you. You don't realize it until you start to get clean." He finished treatment at a methadone clinic in 1995.

He and his wife had been experiencing marital problems for some time, but Dominique was born three years later. They separated because she continued to use drugs, he said.

"It is difficult for a person to let go," said Mr. McDonald, referring to drugs.

His wife is currently in a recovery program and has been free of drugs for a year, he said last month.

When Mr. McDonald finished treatment, he had regained custody of his children and renewed his dedication to his family. The bond between them has been strengthened by assistance provided by the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service.

The bureau provides Mr. McDonald a home attendant, Sadie Barnes, who came into their lives after the family had been in a shelter for over a year before moving into

their current apartment in 2000.

Ms. Barnes noticed that the children's sagging beds were propped up with aluminum cans, and she drew \$1,034 from the Neediest Cases for new beds and a dresser.

"It makes me feel good," Mr. McDonald said. "I couldn't have done that on my own."

Often taking on the role of both parents, he frequently looked to Ms. Barnes for guidance about seeing a woman's perspective. "She tells me what's up," he said.

"When I look at them now," he said of his daughters, "I see what accomplishments they have made."

As his daughter Sheena entered the narrow, cluttered room holding her baby, he said, "This one here, she loves to dance."

Despite Mr. McDonald's success in staying off drugs, financial demands still strain the family, he said. He receives \$1,160 a month in worker's compensation, from which he pays \$300 toward the \$1,400 rent of his subsidized housing.

But the \$590 worth of food stamps the family receives does not last through the month, and their landlord has declined to renew their lease.

In January, they will not have a home, unless Mr. McDonald can find another subsidized apartment for his large family.

Mr. McDonald tries to stay positive. "Nothing can be as bad as where I come from. Every day it is a bonus," he said, putting his granddaughter on his lap. He kissed her.

"Every day I don't use -- it is a bonus," he said.