

Features

Former basketball star tells how cocaine ruined his life

By Aleta Sinkfield
Staff Writer

Mike Helms was on top of the world as a star basketball player at Wake Forest University in the early 1980s.

But within a startlingly short time, he was in a crowded, dirty prison, forced to stuff tissue in his nose to ward off cockroaches that warmed over him in bed.

What caused Helms to fall so far so fast?

Cocaine.

At one point he was so addicted to the drug that if he saw white specks on the floor, he would reach for them, hoping they would be bits of cocaine to restore his high. His habit eventually was costing him \$600 to \$700 a day.

Having turned to dealing to support his habit, Helms was arrested for drug trafficking in Forsyth County, N.C., in March 1983. He was tried, convicted and sentenced to two years in jail.

But even then the need to have the white substance would not let him go. During a work-release period, Helms was again caught with the drug and was given an additional 14 years on his prison sentence.

Today Helms' home is the Graham Honor Grade Camp in Alamance County. He tours the site, giving lectures on the dangers of drug abuse. He's trying to get his life back together. Helms spoke to athletes and other members of the Elon College community last Friday. The 29-year-old former basketball star was the first speaker in the college's week-long symposium on substance abuse.

Throughout junior high and high school, Helms participated in such sports as track, football, cross country and basketball. By his sophomore year, he focused his attention on basketball and in 1978, was named among the top basketball players in Virginia. From there, he went on to sign a scholarship to Wake Forest.

He won All-Atlantic Coast Conference honors and was later drafted by the Houston Rockets in the fourth round. What went wrong along the road of this success story?

After signing his basketball scholarship to attend Wake Forest, Helms went out with a few of his friends to celebrate. It was there that he smoked marijuana for the first time. Unfortunately, as time went on, his continuing "celebrations" led him to prison, to which he refers as his "hell on earth."

Prison has its minor and major discomforts, Helms pointed out. The minor discomforts consist of overpopulation and unsanitary conditions. There are 160 men housed at the prison camp where Helms does time, yet there is only enough room for 120 to 130 men. He said this becomes a big problem, especially when there are only six toilets and eight showers to be shared by this group of inmates.

Major discomforts, he said, revolve around men seeking love and companionship, results in homosexuality. "You must be strong in order not to fall prey to such activity," he said.

Helms said he was first introduced to cocaine at a party when a guy entered the room with a mirror on which a white substance was placed. He was told that it was cocaine and told to give it a try. Since he had mastered alcohol and marijuana, he said he thought he could master cocaine, but it was not true. He soon developed a very expensive habit. To support his need for the drug, Helms turned to selling cocaine.

During a sale in March 1983, he was arrested by an undercover policeman in Forsyth County. According to Helms, he was "set up" by one of his "business associates."

A judge sentenced him to two years in prison, giving Helms ample time to change his life for the better. It did not quite work that way. Helms wound up in court again for his infatuation with cocaine. This time he faced another judge, who referred to him as "hard-headed" since Helms had



Mike Helms


abused his chance to turn his life around. Because of this, that judge sentenced Helms to an additional 14 years.

Since November 1983, Helms has faced the reality of having to spend seven to eight years of a 16-year sentence in prison.

Upon release from prison, Helms said, his main goal is to complete the eight semester hours he has left at Wake Forest and to get his degree. As he visits schools giving his anti-drug lectures, he stresses that it is up to the individual to make the first step toward recovery by admitting to himself that he has a drug problem and needs help.

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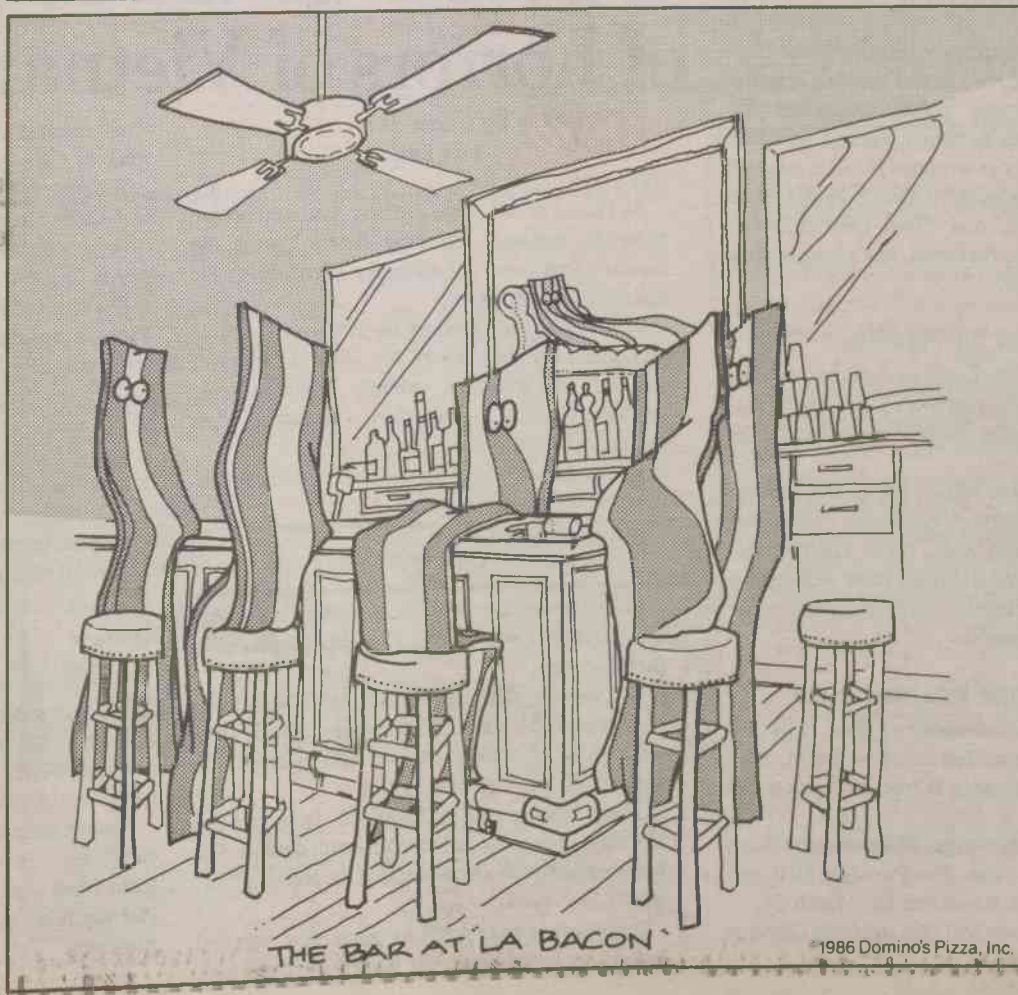
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