

Elon staff member rebuilds life

Katherine Blunt
News Editor

The congregation is small in size but big in presence, and he stands in the back. As the chords of "Amazing Grace" swell, his arms rise above his head and his closed eyes turn upward. On any given Sunday, Tommy Purcell, 51, can be found swaying with the music, charged by its power.

The hands he holds high are a carpenter's hands, calloused and weathered, rough like the sandpaper in the toolbox he totes between houses on the Elon University campus as a maintenance director. But they are also hands that once tilted beer after beer and raised joint after joint to his lips. They are hands that have been wrapped around liquor bottles then steering wheels then jail bars. They are hands that later lay limp by his side in a hospital bed, yellowed and bleeding at the tips.

As the hymn lyrics fade into the recesses of the Greater Love World Outreach Center, he sits and buries his face in his hands, clearly lost in retrospection.

A rough beginning

Purcell was 8 years old the first time he got drunk. He snuck a liquor bottle under the porch of his home in Tampa, Fla., while his parents were hosting a party. He emerged tipsy and confused, and his parents laughed. His knee still bears a scar from that day.

But Purcell didn't always live with his parents. His biological father and mother separated when he was a year old, and



PHOTO SUBMITTED
Purcell and his daughters Kristyne and Lenzie were reunited after he stopped abusing alcohol.



PHOTO SUBMITTED
Tommy Purcell was reunited with his older daughter, Kristyne, just before her wedding. Purcell said his ability to walk her down the aisle was a work of God.

his grandmother became his guardian. When his grandfather got sick, he was sent to a foster home until his mother remarried and regained custody.

By 13, Purcell was making regular trips from the inner city to the Tampa countryside to drink beer with his friends. He was uprooted, though, right before entering high school. His stepfather got into some legal trouble and moved his family to North Carolina. After a few months, they settled in Burlington.

At Southern Alamance High School, Purcell ran with an older crowd. He continued drinking, started smoking marijuana on a regular basis and began experimenting with hallucinogens and amphetamines. But the most dangerous habit he developed was driving while drunk, and he soon found himself in court. The judge told him to enlist in the Air Force, and he did. He was 19.

While stationed at Seymour John-

son Air Force Base in Goldsboro, he met a woman from New York.

"There were a lot of drugs around there," Purcell said. "She went hard like I did."

Not long after she became pregnant, Purcell was honorably discharged for positive urinary analysis, but it "should've been dishonorable (discharge)," he said.

He married the woman and remained in the Goldsboro area. His first daughter, Kristyne, was born in September 1982, when he was 21.

His marriage didn't last, though. After the divorce, his ex-wife scooped the 2-year-old toddler into her arms and headed to New York, leaving Purcell with an empty house.

But as two left his life, one came in. His brother, who had also struggled with drugs and alcohol, came to stay with him in Goldsboro. After about a year, he, too, enlisted in the Air Force and left Purcell by himself.

"My brother filled the void of my little girl," Purcell said. "After he left, I started drinking more and using drugs again."

Against all odds

Purcell soon moved back to Burlington, and his drinking habits intensified. His legal record grew longer and more dismal with each DUI and drug charge, and he grew exceedingly familiar with the Alamance County Jail.

On a fateful night in October 1986, Purcell became the object of a high-speed car chase. Reckless and intoxicated, he fled the police and the 13 substance-related charges against him. His truck flipped, engulfing Purcell in a rain of glass and a haze of smoke. The police screeched to a halt and pulled Purcell out of his overturned vehicle through the shattered windshield. As they dragged him away from the wreckage,

the truck exploded, generating a wave of heat and debris that bowled Purcell and the officers to the ground. They regained their bearings, and Purcell anticipated his arrest.

"I had 13 charges against me. Drinking and driving, running from the law, possession, all kinds of things," he said. "But they told me, 'You're lucky to be alive. Just go home.'"

What would have amounted in a felony resulted only in the revocation of his driver's license. At 25 years old, he had about 15 DUI charges and four DUI convictions to his name.

Another woman soon caught his eye. She was only 18, but she, too, liked to drink and get high. The two dated for several years, and Purcell became a father for the second time in 1992.

"God put those little girls into my life at times just enough to slow me down," he said. "(Becoming a father) didn't stop my drinking, but it would