

What a Long Strange Trip it's been for this Alumnus

by Raven DeVoll '09

After 22 years, Matt Whitis can finally say he graduated from Otterbein College. Although it was a long and tumultuous path—in and out of prison, drug and alcohol abuse and even thoughts of suicide—Whitis believes his past experiences have helped form him into the man he is today.

Whitis began his Otterbein career in 1986. He planned to enter the education field and knew that Otterbein was known for its great program. He also chose Otterbein because of cross country coach Dave Lehman.

Other inspirational people who touched Whitis' life during his short time at Otterbein were Bob Gatti, current vice president of student affairs, and Becky Smith, current director of alumni relations. "The close knit community helped me grow, and you wouldn't get that at a big university," he said.

After one quarter at Otterbein, Whitis was enjoying his classes and was excelling at cross country, but admits to partying a little too hard. He realizes now that he was an alcoholic and drug addict by the end of high school. Not allowed to participate in the nationals cross country competition because of his habits, Whitis transferred to Malone College in Canton, Ohio.

"I went somewhere else, but took my problems with me," he said. At Malone, he was kicked out of school and eventually off campus property after only one year.

He then enlisted in the army; his initial duty began in Desert Storm in 1991, but he quickly returned to the states and entered the Ohio National Guard. While overseas he became ill with Desert Storm Syndrome, an illness caused by exposure to pesticides, affecting 200,000 veterans. Whitis lost 70 pounds and all the hair on his body, broke out in skin rashes and suffered from mental anguish. This illness did not help his drug and alcohol addiction, but tormented him even more.

After moving back to Northeast Ohio and getting married, his wife's son died at the mere age of 3 ½ from the stomach disease, peritonitis. This traumatic experience pushed Whitis over the edge. "It really took me all the way down to the darkest, black hole I've ever been to in my life," he said. He no longer cared about living. Instead he was incarcerated after countless DUI's, disorderly conduct, domestic violence and a felony charge. Gatti, always faintly present in Whitis' life, reappeared by writing a letter to the judge vouching for him. This letter gave Whitis only 5 ½ years in prison instead of the allotted 15.

Once he got out of prison, Whitis struggled in and out of rehabilitation centers, not knowing how to fix his problem. He was on the brink of suicide before finally entering the House of Hope Rehabilitation Center in Columbus and lived there for six months while working on himself. He went back to work when he finished and soon was in contact with Gatti again, who convinced him to return to Otterbein.

After acquiring enough credits, Whitis completed training, classes and tests through the State of Ohio to become an alcohol and drug counselor. With only one class left at Otterbein, he was offered a job as a case management counselor at the North Central Mental Health Services in Columbus in 2003, and never got around to finishing the final class.

Whitis came back to school in 2008 to finish and graduated from Otterbein this past December with a bachelor's degree in sociology. He was motivated to go back because of his personal belief of the importance of completion, an idea he shares with his patients.

With this belief and help from Otterbein, Whitis was able to graduate. "I can't imagine another school being so supportive to one individual. I still have letters and cards from Becky Smith while I was in Desert Storm. And Bob helped me outside of Otterbein. He took me to treatment once because I couldn't drive. It speaks volumes of the school itself to have people like that work there," he said.

Running has also been a huge motivator in his recovery. He currently runs 110 miles each week. He participates in USA Track and Field which has taken him all over the country with his cross country skills. "God allowed me to keep my motivation and ability to run. As a young kid it was my passion, and during my darkest times I was unable to run. But now I can," he explained.

Whitis offers incoming freshmen advice. He believes it's important for students to connect with organizations on campus in order to get the most out of their experience. "Align yourself with doing the right thing. Also, make the contacts with people rooted in the college, like Bob and Becky, who are such good people. They've been great supporters of mine this whole way," he said.

Whitis currently lives in South Carolina with his wife where he hopes to receive his master's degree in social work at the University of South Carolina. He eventually sees himself helping others by getting them to look at life differently and asking for help when they need it. ●

