



Two sides of gambling: Addicted mom attempts suicide, retiree seeks harmless fun

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The northwest suburban mother of three always knew what she would do if her secret was found out.

So when that day came, she carried out her plan, calmly standing in line at the pharmacy, filling two bottles with anti-hypertension medication.

She went home and downed both.

A divorce, a lost job, thousands of dollars in debt — and two suicide attempts.

That's what having a casino near her home meant for the self-described gambling addict.

“It strangles you. It pulverizes you. It's not harmless and it's not innocent, when it gets to the point of no return. It is a predatory beast of an addiction,” said Melinda, 50, who asked that her last name not be used.

But Richard Scheibenreif tells a far different story.

Since the Rivers Casino opened in Des Plaines, he has become a regular, carrying a member “preferred” card that gets him free lunch and free valet parking. He enjoys the food, being on a first-name basis with casino workers — and a gambling rush he describes as part of a controlled habit, but not an addiction.

“When the dice get hot, the climax is longer for me than it is having sex with you,” the Bloomingdale retiree says he tells his wife. “She wants to hit me over the head when I say that.”

Scheibenreif and Melinda are two sides of the same coin.

The yin and the yang of gambling as state legislators weigh a massive expansion.

Proponents point to Scheibenreif as their typical target customer, someone with some expendable income out for some fun.

But opponents say Melinda is a snapshot of what Chicago could expect with its own casino.

“That’s the human side of what the politicians call a painless revenue stream,” says Tom Grey, spokesman and field director for the Stop Predatory Gambling Foundation. “The politicians don’t factor her into the equation.”

At issue in Springfield is a casino-expansion bill that would add a city-owned casino in Chicago; four other casinos, and slot machines at racetracks and at two city airports.

Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel is working behind the scenes to land a casino, selling it as a way to designate revenues to city schools. Gov. Pat Quinn said he would back the bill with the right oversight and so long as pension reform also is passed.

On Thursday, state Rep. Robert Rita (D-Blue Island), the House bill sponsor, said even with just one day before session ends, there was still time to find consensus.

“We have a lot of time for it to go either way,” Rita said.

Melinda is convinced the thousands in Illinois who suffer from debilitating gambling addictions would grow in number if legislation authorizing a massive expansion of casinos advances in the Illinois Legislature.

Her own addiction was a secret for years, and she said she always knew what she would do if her secret was found out.

So when that day came, she carried out her plan, calmly standing in line at the pharmacy, filling two bottles with anti-hypertension medication.

She went home and downed both.

She once had to drive to Joliet — in a planned, organized trip — if she wanted to play the slots. When the Riverboat Casino opened in Elgin, just 10 minutes from her home, it became a constant temptation that she could not resist.

“What it did to me, I can’t even begin to tell you. I could not stop it any more than I could stop the tides of the ocean,” she said.

Melinda survived that suicide attempt — and one other. She also survived a divorce, losing a job of 27 years as well as tens of thousands of dollars — once losing \$80,000 in three months.

In a nearby suburb, at a different casino, a different scenario plays out.

Twice a week, every week, Scheibenreif spends a few hours at the craps tables in the Rivers Casino in Des Plaines, buying in at about \$800. He knows which in-casino restaurant has the best Patty Melt “where they really grill up the onions right” and raves about Hugo’s shrimp cocktail.

On a recent day, casino workers there saw him perusing tables and called out: “Hi Rich!”

After 40 years of playing at various casinos and riverboats, Scheibenreif, 70, insists he has stuck by his guiding mantra: “Don’t spend the grocery money.”

But gambling opponents say the plight of the Melindas outweigh the pleasures of the Scheibenreifs.

According to the Illinois Gaming Board, 9,957 people have put their names on the state’s self-exclusion list. That list is made up of people who want to be arrested for trespassing and stopped from gambling if they’re found in any of the state’s casinos.

That outnumbers the 7,828 employees employed by the 10 casinos in Illinois.

“It is creating more victims than jobs,” says Grey.

Melinda says it’s the slot machines — which make up a greater part of casino gaming — that really suck in the addict. The thought of an expansion makes her want to scream from the rooftops.

“All we’re doing with this expansion is allowing people like me to fail. It’s wrong, just wrong,” she said.

At her worst, she’d leave a dollar in her car before heading into the riverboat so she would have some gas money left after gambling away every last penny she had. She often intended to gamble for just an hour but would easily stay for half the day.

One time, she realized it was 4 p.m. and she hadn’t picked up one of her kids from school. On another occasion — one of her lowest points — she was in the full throes of playing slots when an elderly patron collapsed and there were cries for help.

Melinda, a trained nurse, at first ignored the cries. She didn’t want to turn away from her game. She did administer CPR, but as she did it, she kept looking at the machine where she had been playing.

“I will be right there in a little bit! Nobody touch that machine!” she yelled out as she was trying to save the person.

But Scheibenreif says he has parlayed an enjoyable habit into a source of extra cash.

He describes a “magic drawer” where at the beginning of the year he allows himself so much money. When he wins, he puts the money back into that drawer. In January, it was \$8,000, which he took out of a retirement account.

It has grown to \$12,000 and took him to Las Vegas, where he visited his daughter, he says.

“It’s my trophy money. I’m still playing with that money,” he says. “You have good days and you have bad days.”

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