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Hard time for a hard lesson

After a 22-month sentence, bank robber and gambling addict Greg Hogan Jr. is free.

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Sitting in a room at the Quality Inn in Altoona earlier this month, Greg Hogan Jr. played his cello for the first time in nearly two years.

Minutes earlier, he'd walked through the gates of Huntingdon State Prison, and his parents had the cello waiting, like an old friend there to comfort him.

As he played as if he'd never been away, it struck his parents how much had changed since that snowy day in December 2005, when Hogan walked into the Wachovia Bank in Allentown and handed the teller a note demanding money.

Hogan was still the same kid with so much musical talent that he twice appeared at Carnegie Hall, and so much charisma that he was president of his Lehigh University class.

But he was also a convicted bank robber whose gambling addiction had trampled his dreams of taking Wall Street by storm.

While Hogan sat in a prison cell, counting the days until he'd be free to play that cello, his classmates at Lehigh graduated.

"When we sent him off to college, we envisioned coming back to Pennsylvania to listen to him make the president's address," said Hogan Sr., who is pastor of a Baptist church in Barberton, Ohio. "Instead, we're here to pick him up from prison."

After 22 months incarcerated, Greg Hogan, now 22, walked out of prison June 16 to meet an uncertain future that is limited by the tags that dog him -- convicted felon and recovering gambling addict.

In some ways, those labels keep him in a different kind of prison. Under the conditions of his probation, which runs well into 2016, Hogan can't walk into a casino, make a legal bet, log onto the Internet or receive e-mails without approval by his Lehigh County parole officer. Violate those, and he risks spending another eight years behind bars.

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Under the conditions of the Alcoholics and Gamblers Anonymous creeds he's adopted, he can't take a sip of alcohol, make even a joking bet or -- at least for now -- own a credit card. Violate those, his father says, and Hogan would risk lapsing into old habits.

And under the standards of today's corporate world, his felony conviction likely has killed any chance for the Wall Street career he'd envisioned as a finance and accounting major at Lehigh.

Hogan, after his release, left all comment to his father, saying he preferred not to draw any more attention to himself.

"Before, Greg's options were unlimited," Hogan Sr. said. "Now they are limited, but he's an intelligent kid and a hard worker. We know he will find a path to do great things."

National debate

His path into prison was one that made national headlines. In 2005, Hogan was a hard-charging overachiever who quickly became president of his Lehigh University class and a cello player in the Lehigh Philharmonic. But the private school kid who grew up outside Cleveland also quickly became hooked on Internet poker. When his gambling debts ballooned, and he used alcohol to help hide the cracks in his perfect student veneer, a frazzled and sleep-deprived Hogan robbed -- without a mask, disguise or gun -- the Wachovia Bank on Union Boulevard.

He walked out with \$2,781, but was arrested a few hours later as he arrived at orchestra practice. He immediately confessed. His parents and attorney called the crime a cry for help by a kid consumed by addiction. The unusual nature of the crime fueled a national debate, not only over the legality of Internet gambling but about whether colleges should be doing more to supervise students on campus.

Hogan, for example, turned to campus library computers after his alarmed father drove seven hours to install a program blocking his dorm computer from gambling sites.

Although Lehigh officials say they have no record of it, Hogan Sr. said he begged university officials to stop his son from gambling on library computers but was told they could only interfere with a student who was a danger to himself or others.

"When we send our kids off to college, they are going from having their mother breathing down their necks to having absolute freedom, overnight," Hogan Sr. said. "I don't believe colleges are merely being paid to educate. I believe it is also their duty to take care of these kids, to provide some measure of supervision."

It's a debate Hogan Sr. has tried to stir many times in the past two years while appearing before Congress as it debated Internet gambling laws, and at nearly a dozen colleges and gambling seminars.

In the wake of the arrest of its sophomore class president, Lehigh did set up a Web site where students could identify dangers and warning signs, and is re-emphasizing that counseling is available for those with a problem. Lehigh also has set up a South Side Development Study Group designed to help prepare the university for the arrival of the Sands Casino, which is scheduled to open in July 2009, a few blocks off campus in south Bethlehem.

However, DeSales University has answered Hogan's call emphatically.

It invited Hogan to speak at the college in 2006, to help students see the dangers. But when Hogan's appearance had some DeSales administrators suggesting that the Catholic university in Center Valley block gambling Web sites on all campus computers, University President the Rev. Bernard F. O'Connor simply said "no." The university has increased its warnings, and will even hold a workshop this fall to help its student affairs staff prepare for the casino's arrival.

But it will not block computers. The limits that would put on students are more damaging than the risks it would guard against, O'Connor decided.

"The important thing is to help our young people understand life and its dangers, not to prohibit them from experiencing it," O'Connor said. "We're educating people for life, not blocking them from the dangers and then sending them off later and saying 'good luck.'"

But the risks are certainly real, and increasing with every new casino or lottery game, said John W. Welte, a research scientist at the University of Buffalo whose Research Institute on Addiction this month will publish the first national survey on youth gambling. In a survey of 2,274 youths aged 14 to 21, it concluded that 11 percent are frequent gamblers and 2.1 percent -- some 750,000 youths nationwide -- are problem gamblers.

"There is problem gambling among young people, and because of the increasing access to gambling, there's reason to be concerned," Welte said. "You just can't add access to gambling without adding gambling problems. If they are building a casino in Bethlehem, then that concern should be greater."

Life on the inside

While Hogan Sr. spent some of the past two years trying to make colleges and parents aware of those kinds of dangers outside, Hogan Jr. was learning how to cope inside. He learned how to keep his head down to avoid trouble with other inmates, told his dad he was shocked how much racism prompted inmates to gravitate into separate gangs, and made his own choice to take refuge with a group of Christian men. He steered clear of all betting, not only when inmates played poker for commissary items like protein drinks, but even when they spiced up television sports games by betting push-ups.

"It's difficult to get drugs or alcohol inside, but everybody gambles," Hogan Sr. said. "Greg's told me he hasn't made a single bet since before his arrest. In the past 22 months, he's had a lot of time to think about why he shouldn't."

Still, even as he moved from the hard-edge Graterford to Camp Hill to Forest and finally to Huntingdon state prison, Hogan received no treatment for his problems with alcohol or gambling.

Hogan now lives with relatives in Bucks County, where he is working part-time in a funeral home as he tries to reshape the future he threw away. He is planning to attend fall classes at Bucks County Committee College, where he hopes to begin earning a degree in electrical engineering, furthering the education he got in prison.

For now, he's back to the bottom of the ladder he started racing up as a young Republican in high school, but his father says eventually -- and gradually -- he'll reopen a checking account, get his college degree and begin a career, albeit a few years late.

Still, all that is far in the future, and unlike the ambitious student he once was, Hogan isn't looking much past the next Gamblers Anonymous meeting.

"We've learned to live one day at a time," Hogan Sr. said. "Every day that passes without gambling is another day away from this. It's another day closer to putting this all behind us."

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