Written by By Jeffrey Smith For the Sun
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The toughest ride for this champion bull rider did not have four legs and horns, but involved moving on from alcohol.

Tibbs Bob Pino grew up on a small family ranch south of the Zuni Mountains by Pinehill, New Mexico. It was a pleasant place to grow up: “the ranch had cows, horses, sheep, everything,” he said. His father was a champion calf roper and “taught me to ride bulls and to rope” he added. He himself later began to win rodeos as a bull rider. However, perhaps his biggest achievement involved his eventually successful fight with alcohol.

Pino went to Pinehill High School and while there joined the rodeo club. He started on the junior rodeo level.

“My dad used to take me everywhere: Belen, Aztec, Alamogordo, Farmington, Gallup and Los Lunas,” he recalled.

He specialized in bull riding.

After graduating from high school, he competed in rodeos thoughout the reservation and New Mexico coming out as champion bull rider at the Bi-County Fair in Prewitt and also the Oak

Canyon and Bread Springs rodeos. The pounding may have begun to take a toll though and at age 27 he began to experience vision problems. By 1994 he was legally blind.

He had married in 1991 and the marriage, to another legally blind individual, involved enough joint alcohol consumption.

“ I started having problems with alcohol,” he said.

Eventually, by 1998 both he and his wife were homeless.

Finally, in 2004 he ended up with a misdemeanor case in Grants and was referred to an alcohol treatment program, the Na Nihzhoozhi Center, Inc. in Gallup.

NCI had a program which was 56 days in length and was made up of eight levels each participant had to work through. He began by attending a daily Alcoholics Anonymous meetings at the center.

AA involves accepting one’s life is unmanageable due to alcohol. It then uses group support, the hard earned experience of people in recovery and an emphasis on asking for spiritual help to maintain sobriety.

“We used to do a lot of meetings in the Hogan in the traditional way. They were singing in the traditional way, the Medicine Man used to bless us,” he said.

The program also used Native American religious practices derived from the Great Plains tribes.

“The program had a sweat lodge, they would pray for you … all the evil stuff would be cleaned from your system,” he said.

Even for the seemingly tough former bull rider ,the sweat lodge was hot.

“I did twenty minutes the first round” he admitted.

He did complete the NCI program and return to Cibola County where he was involved in individual substance abuse counseling. He had difficulty interacting with the first counselor, but switched to another and successfully completed the course.

Meanwhile, he attended a Christian form of AA meetings called Celebrate Recovery at the local center for the homeless, Community Outreach. He moved back into housing.

He asked his wife to join him in sobriety but she wasn’t ready.

“I can drink as long as I want to,” he recalled her saying.

The marriage ended in divorce and he missed her for some time.

The champion bull rider is quite honest and admitted that “after I got out of NCI I still had a craving for a beer and I drank a couple of beers. It’s hard, you have to be strong.”

He went on to give one technique he used to avoid relapse. He would drink “any substitute for beer – coke or coffee or water or juice” he said.

Pino now has eleven years of sobriety. He feels like the lessons he learned in a ranching family with two hard working parents left him resilient. His mother’s maiden name is Dorothy Natan and his father is Clarence Bob. He is grateful they provided him a sense of a life worth fighting

to return to.

“That for all those out there who have an alcohol or drug addiction, you have a choice to make, which side you are going to be on,” he said. “I’m glad I’m on the right track with God.”