

Homeless

Personal trainer says his life is success story

Continued from Page A1

father for the first time in years. The call lasted about 90 minutes.

"As much as I had rehearsed over and over before talking to him, I had a lot of emotion. I broke down a bit," Smith said. "I told him that I'd been lost for a while and in the last three years I've been working on a project to find some answers."

It might result in a trip to his hometown in Argos, Ind.

"He said, 'You know, what's in the past is in the past. I always have loved you and always will and if you want to swing by, I'll throw a steak on there and if you want to drink a beer, I'll give you a beer.'"

Meanwhile, he continues as a personal trainer for wealthy customers and spending nights sleeping in his car parked in downtown Akron. He cooks his meals outdoors on grills during the heat of summer and chill of winter.

That's where he got some inspiration from an unusual source last winter.

It was a stray dog, unkempt and skinny.

It approached Smith haltingly.

"I was sitting there cooking on a new grill . . . and the dog came out of the woods," he said. "He came walking toward me. I could tell he was starved and he had three clumps of ice on three of his feet, so I just had a conversation with him, and I said, 'Well, we're both homeless here.'"

He gave the dog bits of a bagel and some chicken.

He had made a friend but he had no place for a dog, so he called park authorities, who sent someone to take in the dog.

When the ranger came, the dog was scared.

"The dog actually stepped over to my feet and sat down and growled at her," Smith said. "We had bonded and I thought that's actually cool."

With Smith's encouragement, the dog willingly allowed a leash on its neck.

Moments later, Smith sent a text to a friend about the events and got this response:

"Who rescued who."

Painful past

Smith's parents went through a painful divorce, with the kids going to their father. Always remote, according to Smith, his father became even more distant when he brought a new girlfriend into the home.

He rejected his mother be-



Above, personal trainer Jeremy Smith, 39, shows one of his prized possessions: a vintage copy of *Your Physique* magazine published by bodybuilder Joe Weider. At right, Smith keeps an eye on Kara Andrew during a workout in her Creston home. Below, Smith works with Jason Andrew as he lifts weights in his Creston home.



cause of things she said about his father.

He told her years ago: "When you tear up and bash my father, you're doing that to me. . . . I can't have that."

That was followed by years apart from his family. An attempt to reunite with his father failed when he realized his dad was trying to make business contacts with his son's wealthy fitness customers.

After contacting his father, now he would like to hear from his mother, but he was told she's missing from Argos, possibly living as a "street person."

Building strength

Fitness and bodybuilding have always been a major factor in Smith's life.

Faced with strained relationships and a desire to make something of himself at age 16, Smith

wrote a letter to legendary bodybuilder Joe Weider. It shared his dreams and ambitions.

He never sent it.

He did, however, become a certified personal trainer, although tough times recently meant he had to allow that certification to lapse.

In a good year, he makes about \$50,000. But there have been bad years, too.

In late 2007, he found himself with \$15,000 in credit-card debt and another \$5,000 in other obligations, a \$30,000 car loan and problems with the Internal Revenue Service. He was about to turn 35 and was looking for a way out.

"I was disappointed in myself at that time because I had achieved nothing," he said. "I needed to do something drastic to get out of this."

It took him months to decide,



but on April 30, 2008, he had a plan.

He calls it his project and he wrote it out on a statement he calls *The Making of an American Success Story*.

"I found the courage to face my fear - and embrace it," he wrote. "I became a homeless person on a mission to transform my life and help others who want to achieve a life worthy of being called 'An American Success Story.'"

He got in better shape so he could do his job better. He vowed to cut costs. He sold off most of his valuables and put the rest in storage. He started sleeping in his car in cold weather, staying in a tent when it was warm.

His path was not a steady one. Sometimes he spent too much money on meals and movies and his debts did not go down steadily.

"My love for the personal training was starting to wobble a little bit," he said. "I lost my passion a little bit."

He's never had emotional counseling, but he knows he's prone to depression. His clients often lend him emotional support.

"I was just doing something,

freeing up the finances," he said.

"That was the game plan, getting myself in great shape, maybe do another competition as a bodybuilder, but I found that when I lowered my [financial] overhead, I still was just about as broke a year in because I had not learned anything yet. . . . I was still just spending. I figured new ways to spend: the car, watching movies."

He also found comfort reading books by Tony Robbins and other popular self-help writers.

The encounter with the dog helped; the reading helped; the relationships he built with clients gave him strength.

Ronald Midcap considers himself a friend and a customer of Smith's.

"I really admire the guy," Midcap said. "He has faced up to stuff and I know he's not only my trainer, I consider him my friend. He's helped me a lot and I've tried to help him some. He's almost like a son."

But this story isn't finished.

Smith now owes about \$8,000, has his business in order and has begun reconnecting with his family. A Facebook connection with his brother's wife helped. That led to him calling his father.

He has plans to enter a bodybuilding competition in Cleveland this year.

But most of all, he wants to tell his story, even though it is not a clear ending with complete success.

He wants to help other people make their own projects.

"It's taken me three years to figure this stuff out and I think I can help some people to get it down to just 12 weeks," he said. "Actually, it's just five minutes to give that stuff its power or not give it the power. . . . Actually, it's within ourselves."

In an ideal world, he would work for a fitness-related company, telling his story and serving as a model for others facing tough times.

But for now, his goals are simple: Pay off the rest of the bills, strengthen his relationships with his family and a recently found girlfriend and even get a new apartment. He wants to compete as a bodybuilder again.

He even hopes someday to get a dog.

He still sleeps in his car, but no longer considers himself homeless.

"I said, 'I'm homeless' before and 'I'm all depressed' and felt like a failure, but now I'm pursuing a passion and I'm on a journey, trying to right my wrongs and being a vehicle of painful experience, sleeping in my car and stuff. Suddenly, I'm an adventurer, so technically, no, I'm not a homeless person."

Dave Scott can be reached at 330-996-3577 or davescott@thebeaconjournal.com.

ROOF LEAKS

GET THE ROOF TUNE-UP ©

\$295.00 complete

• **SEAL UP TO 3 LEAKS**

WE REMOVE ROOF ICE & SNOW

with a 3-YEAR LEAK INSPECTION WARRANTY + FREE ESTIMATES

NEW Heated Gutters

Stop inside water damage & falling gutters.

(2-CAR) FLAT RUBBER ROOF \$1320.00 WITH 10 YR. MFG. WARRANTY

Senior Discounts \$150.00

• INSURED-LICENSED SINCE 1965

MURPHY & SON INC.

Thanks for the business!

1-330-865-7600

Dillard's

CELEBRATEDAD

FATHER'S DAY IS JUNE 19

Cole Haan

STYLE & COMFORT, GUARANTEED

All styles shown, \$158.

RECEIVE A \$50 DILLARD'S REWARDS CERTIFICATE* WITH THE PURCHASE OF 2 PAIR OR \$20 WITH THE PURCHASE OF 1 PAIR.

FEEL THE DIFFERENCE IN A PAIR OF COLE HAAN "PINCH AIR" OR "AIR CARTER" SERIES SHOES WITH NIKE AIR TECHNOLOGY

- Nike Air Technology
- Full latex footbed
- Flex bar

*DILLARD'S REWARDS CERTIFICATE EXPIRES ON 7.20.2011

Treat Your DAD LIKE a KING!

• BRAXTON CULLER • WYNDHAM • WOODWARD • LLOYD FLANDERS • BROWN JORDAN • NCI

• ALFRESCO • TROPITONE • TELESCOPE • GENSUN • TOMMY BAHAMA • ORIFLAME • FIRE PITS

Outdoor Wicker Great Place to take a nap!

Best Father's Day Present! Swivel Recliners

TV consoles Great Selections

Outdoor Wicker Great Place to take a nap!

Dimitroff's

FURNITURE & DESIGN

Quality, Value, Service & Integrity

981 Ghent Rd. • Bath, Ohio
330-666-0786
(corner of Ghent & I-77)

M, W, Th 10-8 • Tues, Fri 10-6 • Sat 10-5, Sun 12-5

www.dimitroffsfurnishings.com