Growing up in East Orange, New Jersey, my family had many memorable Christmas celebrations, both good and bad. We usually had a lot of fun and loved our Christmas rituals. However, since my mom and dad were both alcoholics, there often were disagreements. As the oldest sibling, I often had to be the peacemaker in the family and make sure that Christmas was not ruined. It was not easy.

Days before Christmas, my parents, sisters and brothers and I walked to a Christmas tree lot to choose the perfect tree for our house. We always had a lot of fun because everyone had an opinion. After bringing it home, my Dad put the tree into a stand and put on strings of lights. Then, my brothers, sisters, and I went to work decorating the tree.

Our Mother had popcorn ready for us and we children put a needle with white thread through the popcorn and made long garlands. We then draped them all around the Christmas tree.

We sang Christmas songs as we decorated the tree. We also made our own ornaments.

We cut out figurines from cardboard, colored them with crayons, and hung them on the branches of the tree. We put on colorful candy canes. We all thought our tree was the most beautiful tree in our neighborhood.

Christmas morning was full of excitement. We children hardly slept all night knowing that “Santa Claus” was coming. What would he bring us? In the morning, we went into the room where the Christmas tree was decorated, and it was ablaze with light, or so it seemed to us. And there were many presents under the tree.

After we had opened all the presents, we played with our new toys. There was a feeling of joy and happiness in everybody. Later in the day, we watched a movie called, “A Christmas Story.” It was a story about a little boy who was picked on by his classmates until one day he stood up to the bullies. The story had a happy ending.

Unfortunately, our Christmas did not always have a happy ending. Aunts, uncles, and cousins came over, and this was fun at first, but people started drinking too much. They started having disagreements. As the oldest child in the family, I had a certain responsibility. I helped my Mom prepare the food, pick up the wrapping paper, and clean the house. And when the bickering turned...
into fighting, I tried to calm people down.

For a time, Christmas in our house included the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. We children learned about Jesus by going to church. Unfortunately, since my mom and dad became alcoholics, we stopped going to church regularly and ultimately we even stopped going on Christmas Day. We lost some of our religious beliefs. Our lives were in turmoil because of drugs and alcohol.

Christmas taught me a lot about life. It taught me that you can’t have the good without the bad, but no matter what, you will always have your family. All these are wonderful memories that stay with me forever, deep in my heart.

Gregory Parker was born in East Orange, NJ. He started school at the age of 6 and finished grade school at the age of 12. After that, he worked with his uncle in a cardboard factory. He never returned to school until he became a student at the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen (TASK) Adult Education Program, which offers free GED preparation.