

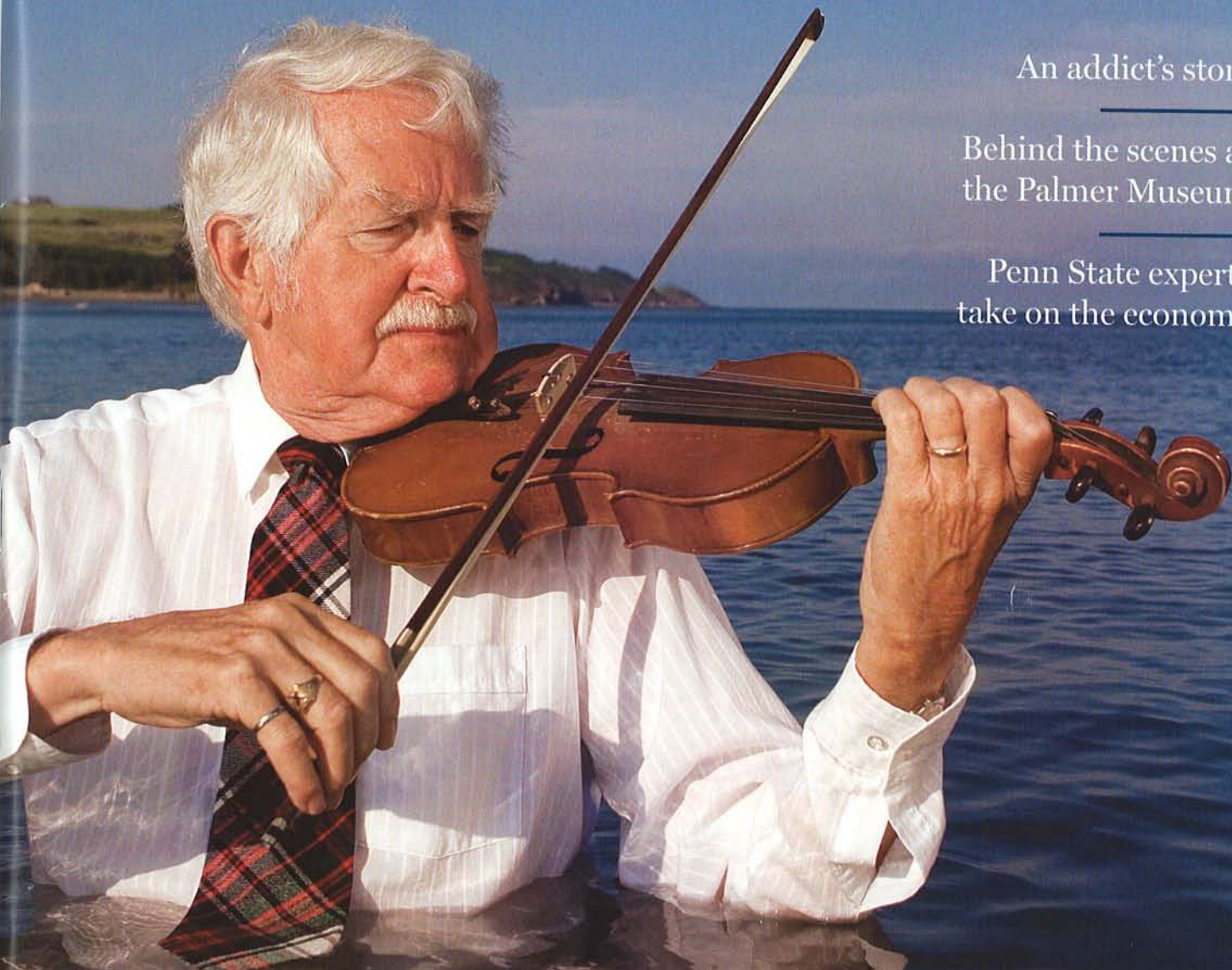
The PennStater

JULY/AUGUST 2008

An addict's story

Behind the scenes at
the Palmer Museum

Penn State experts
take on the economy



Photographers Kate Barden and
Bruce Cramer take us to
Cape Breton Island

where
music is *life*

SHE COULD SEE ROCK BOTTOM BY AGE 12.
WHEN SHE HIT IT AT AGE 22, SHE WAS AN
ALCOHOLIC AND A CRACK ADDICT.

HOW JENNIFER STORM CAME BACK FROM THE DEAD.

FADE TO LIGHT

Photos by Cardoni

BY MAUREEN HARMON '00 BEHREND



JENNIFER STORM'S MEMORY FROM THE NIGHT OF NOV. 7, 1997, IS EERILY VIVID when it comes to the number of drinks she had. She shared a bottle of champagne and a pitcher of Mudslides with friends at her apartment. Later she hit the bar and had five Amstel lights and four shots of Jägermeister. She knows she headed back to the kitchen to give her dealer, a cook, exactly \$100 to score some crack. She knows the two of them retreated to her apartment and managed to kill all 10 bags throughout the night and into the morning, and even so, she knows that, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't seem to get high enough.

So after the cook left, Storm, then 22, shut the door, walked into her bathroom, grabbed a pink Daisy razor and snapped the blades out of the plastic casing. What she wanted at that moment was out. Out of this body, this skin, this life.

An attempted rape that had happened 10 years earlier still haunted her; her mother was dead; and addiction had taken over her entire life. This suicide attempt was not like the one she had tried back when she was 13. That time, she downed full bottles of Valium, her grandmother's blood pressure pills, and a bottle of peach schnapps. That first time, back in 1987, she had called her mother just before blacking out. That time her mother had called an ambulance and she made it to the hospital. That time she came close—she flatlined, right there in the hospital room while her family watched. But she didn't really mean it—then. Now, 10 years older, Jennifer was serious. She wanted to die.

So Storm methodically placed photos of her family on her bed. She sat down in the middle of them, took the blade to her wrist and started slicing. She sat there, holding on to her mother's rosary beads, socking back a bottle of Skyy vodka, and just waited to bleed out.

At some point, Storm called her father and his wife, Patty, but she has no idea what she said on their answering machine. Something, she's sure, about loving them.

The message actually went like this: "I'm just calling to tell you that I really, really love you both. And that you mean everything in the world to me." Then her voice breaks. "Daddy," Storm said, "I love you."

TODAY THE CUTS ON JENNIFER STORM'S WRISTS have sealed up with thick scar tissue, and as she answers e-mails in her office at the Dauphin County Courthouse in Harrisburg, Pa., the scars are covered by the sleeves of her gray blazer. Storm '02 Edu is getting ready to meet up with Tanya Bartlebaugh, one of her employees. The pair is set to escort a brother and sister to court to

observe the preliminary hearing for the man who allegedly beat their mother to death last year.

Storm is executive director of the Dauphin County Victim/Witness Assistance Program, a position she landed in 2002. She is well aware that her past life, the one that plunged her deep into addictions to alcohol and drugs, made her especially good at what she does today. She's the one who knocks on doors in the middle of the night to tell parents that their son or daughter has been murdered in the midst of a drug deal or as a result of domestic abuse. She's the one who accompanies the families of murder victims to court, protects the families from the media, and sometimes just watches a toddler in her office's makeshift nursery while the child's parents are in court. She's the one who helps prepare victims for trial, explaining to them what to expect, walking them through gruesome crime-scene photos of their loved ones. During her first year on the job, she had a case that was all too familiar: a 12-year-old rape victim facing the witness stand. Seeing that little girl, Storm says, made her realize how young a 12-year-old looks.

WHEN JENNIFER STORM WAS 12, SHE HAD HER first blackout. It was the result of an evening spent drinking Busch pounders in a field near her home in Allentown with an older friend named Lisa, Lisa's boyfriend, and an 18-year-old named Michael. When Storm woke, Michael—who she would later learn was actually 28—was on top of her, trying to rape her. After freeing herself, she ran naked to the car, climbed in, and tried to make sense of the night.

By the time Lisa and the boys dropped Storm off at home, hours after she should have arrived, her parents were frantic. "When she did get home," James Storm, Jennifer's father, recalls, "we certainly noticed there was something wrong with her. I don't precisely remember [how she was acting], but it was not normal, so we were hammering her, you know, hitting her with questions,

and finally she fessed up." A call to the police and a trip to St. Luke's Hospital to complete a rape kit followed. Michael was tracked down and charged with rape, corruption of a minor, and related offenses. At the preliminary hearing Storm went on the stand. "I was shaking and giddy, unable to control anything around me," Jennifer writes in her memoir *Blackout Girl*, which hit bookstores in February. "... I had to relive that strange night that only came to me in bits and pieces and that I really didn't ever want to recall, as my lawyer gently tried to pull details from my absent mind. I wasn't really there."

Jennifer's parents had a decision to make: They could let the case go to trial and put a 12-year-old victim on the stand again, or they could agree to a plea bargain, allowing Michael a lighter conviction and sentence. "If it had gone to a full-blown trial," James Storm says, "she would be annihilated on the stand by the defense attorneys, and we certainly didn't want that. So we had to make the decision, the old cop-a-plea thing ... that's the legal system." Michael was convicted of criminal attempt to commit rape, spent a few years in jail, and paid a fine of \$206.

ADDICTION IN THE STORM HOUSE WAS PASSED from generation to generation. Jennifer's mother, Mara Jean, started popping Valium in 1975 after Jennifer arrived two weeks early without warning—no labor pains, no nesting instinct, nothing. Mara Jean made her way to the bathroom and found that her third child was about to be born whether she was ready or not. She wasn't. The trauma of giving birth on her bed without medical personnel, she claimed, led to a 20-year Valium habit. Storm's grandmother drank a fifth of whiskey a day until she hemorrhaged from her nose and mouth. Then she switched to beer. As a child, Jennifer would sit at the kitchen table, her mother sipping coffee, Grandma chugging a Busch. "I would study these women, the role models set before me," she writes, "and wonder if this was what I was going to do when I grew up."

The attempted rape haunted Jennifer. And, to protect her, her family never spoke about it. With her dad working long hours in his sales job, Jennifer found respite through the fantasies in books like *Little House on the Prairie*, where she could become a part of the perfect Ingalls family that didn't house any alcoholic grandmothers or pill-popping moms. Later, she would imagine herself in Sweet Valley, Calif., home of the fictitious but still beautiful Wakefield twins in the *Sweet Valley High* series.



Storm's early life was normal until a combination of tragedies—her parents' divorce, being sexually assaulted at age 12, the loss of her best friend to suicide—led her to alcohol and drugs for escape.



By the time Storm (pictured here with brothers Jimmy and Brian) was in high school, she was drinking daily and had developed a cocaine and crack habit.



After the death of her mother (at right in photo) in 1997, Storm managed to stay sober long enough to plan the funeral. But on the day of the burial, she got drunk.



In order to satisfy her need for crack, Storm spent all of her money on drugs, and often would eat only one meal a week.



After his divorce from Storm's mother, James Storm married Patty, a woman Jennifer now calls "Mom," and whose stability she credits with saving her life.

Later Storm found other, darker, ways to disappear beyond fiction and stealing sips of Grasshoppers at her parents' parties. On her 13th birthday, Storm planned that first suicide attempt, the plan that involved prescription drugs and booze. By the time she called her mother at the fitness center in Easton where Mara Jean worked, she was blasted and slurring. When the ambulance arrived, she was on the edge of consciousness. Her family gathered around her hospital bed. "I saw my father, my mother, both of my brothers, and my grandmother standing in front of me," Storm writes. "Just as I tried to speak, I heard a loud beeping noise and two doctors ran into the room. Through a fog, I heard one of them yell, 'You have to leave, we're losing her.'"

"Then everything faded to black."
Jennifer would spend the next six months in a psych ward. "That's where they put you," she says with an easy smile, "when you try to kill yourself." And though her father would drag her to psychiatrist after psychiatrist, counseling seemed no match for the almost unbelievable litany of tragedies that hit her in the coming years: Her parents divorced. Her mother took off. Her best friend killed herself. So did her cousin. She began to question her sexuality. She became bulimic. She was raped two more times, once when she was sober enough to protest, and later when she was unconscious.

By her junior year of high school she had discovered cocaine, the perfect counterbalance to alcohol. The white powder gave Storm a rush that allowed her to drink even more. "When I started doing cocaine, I realized I could drink as much as I wanted as long as I did a couple of lines every hour or so." But Storm was 19 when she found her true love. After a night of heavy drinking and drug use, she tried crack. "Crack did everything I had always wanted alcohol and other drugs to do—it took away all the pain and left me feeling numb and peaceful. In that instant crack became my best friend. I was addicted before I even exhaled."

STORM IS AWARE THAT HER BOOK WILL BE MET with skepticism from some readers, but as with most things in her life, she approaches it with humor and offers what she calls her "James Frey disclaimer": "I can't remember all the details," she says, and had to rely on her family to fill in many of the blanks.

Considering the life she's led, Storm laughs a lot. Her humor, her openness about her past, the way she can talk to anyone about anything, all help her keep her addictions at bay—and help her deal with having to



It's not unusual to see a child running through the Victim/Witness Assistance Program while parents and other family members meet with staff or head to court. Storm and her employees turned one of the offices into a makeshift playroom and often act as babysitters.

spend a morning watching a lawyer defend a child molester and then face the family when the criminal gets what she considers a slap on the wrist. She thinks about the time in 2003 when she got a homicide call, and had to go to the home of a family to tell them their daughter had fallen off the wagon, had gone to a bar and done drugs with a man who later beat her with the prong end of a hammer. "They were some of the most graphic crime scene photos I had ever seen," she says.

She's well aware that only 10 short years ago, someone could have been knocking on her parents' door.

At the height of Storm's addiction, she would drive to her dealer's house at 3:00 a.m. to score. If he was out, she would drive through the streets of Allentown in a drunken haze, asking complete strangers for crack. Sometimes she would land a bag right there. Sometimes a dealer would hop in her car and ask for a ride to the crack house. "I never had any fear about it," she writes.

She did make a few attempts at recovery. Once, in her early 20s, she attended an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, but was the youngest alcoholic there and says she couldn't relate to anyone. Then she tried a teen group,

but celebrated 30 days of sobriety with a shot of Jägermeister, which led to more shots and a crack pipe by night's end. She also managed to stay relatively sober as her mother lay dying of breast cancer when Storm was 21. After she died in her arms, Jennifer handled all the details, chose the casket, chose the funeral home. On the day she buried her mother, though, she got drunk.

PATTY STORM, JAMES' SECOND WIFE and the woman Jennifer now calls "Mom," is a firm believer that all addicts have a rock bottom, and she is convinced that the morning of Nov. 8, 1997, was Jennifer's. "We were at the hospital," recalls Patty. "She just was crying and she said, 'I just want help.' I really think that she was just reaching out and saying, 'I don't want to live this lifestyle. I want out of this.'"

Storm has not touched a drop of alcohol since the day she wanted to die. She made it through 28 days of rehab at White Deer Run in Allenwood, Pa., where she revisited her childhood, the attempted rape when she was 12, her parents' split, her eating disorder, her addictions. "It was painful and at times utterly exhausting," she writes. She spent two months in a halfway house. She eventually moved to State College as a way of putting some physical distance between her sober self and past life. She managed to get herself into Penn State and made it through four years with all the temptations that a party school has to offer. She had other things to do, a degree in rehabilitation services to earn. And she got involved: She had her duties as president of Lambda Delta Omega, as a member of Skull & Bones and the student group for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students and their supporters. She spoke at rallies. Participated in a sit-in at the HUB in 2001, asking the administration to act against hate crimes, after she received a death threat condemning her for being a lesbian. She even sewed the curtains that hang in the LGTBTA office in Boucke Building. "I found peace in sobriety," Storm writes. "[A]nd just running my fingers over my scars helped me stay sober one more day."

After graduating in 2002, Storm became the first full-time director of the Statewide Pennsylvania Rights Coalition, which advocates for people in the state's LGTBTA community. Later that year Gov. Ed Rendell named Storm to serve on Pennsylvania's Commission on Crime and Delinquency, an appointment she'll hold until next year. In August of 2002, Storm took the job with Dauphin County, where, on this day in March, a

little girl with braids and a big smile runs among the cubicles of the Victim/Witness Assistance Program. Every once in a while the girl breezes past Storm's office and peeks in, but mainly the girl just smiles and makes conversation with the other staff as she ducks in and out of the room Storm and her crew have packed full of toys to entertain the children whose families seek their services. Normally, Storm would stop and play for a few

STORM IS WELL AWARE THAT ONLY 10 SHORT YEARS AGO, SOMEONE COULD HAVE BEEN KNOCKING ON HER PARENTS' DOOR.

minutes, but today she has to meet with the daughter and son of a murdered woman. Storm and Bartlebaugh will escort the pair to court, act as buffers between the children of the deceased and the murder suspect, their mother's former boyfriend. The details of this particular case have Storm fuming. This guy, says Storm, has been free on bail for the past year, and will be a free man until sentencing. That means he's free to roam the courthouse, grab a smoke, hit the john. At any point he could run into the daughter and son of his late girlfriend, and they would be faced with the man they firmly believe beat their mom to death in a drunken rage. Storm and Bartlebaugh will be there to make sure that doesn't happen. Before trial, the pair stand by the elevators with the children of the murder victim, carefully scoping around the corner for the defendant and his family members. When the coast is clear and the defendant is seated at his table, Storm and Bartlebaugh guide the young woman and man into the courtroom and slide in beside them on the old wooden benches. In two days, Storm will be on her way to a writers' conference in Delaware to sign copies of *Blackout Girl* for other aspiring memoirists, to read with other authors, to talk to aspiring writers about the difficulties that go along with writing about the hard stuff when she sits on a panel called "So You Hate Your Mother." What she'll tell them is simply the truth. "I'm not a literary writer," she says. "I'm not going to be winning any awards, that wasn't the purpose for the book. Addiction is not something that's flowery. It's brutal and honest and raw."

But for now her only job is to sit on this bench next to Bartlebaugh and this family that need her help. Her job at this moment is to simply be here. ♣