When Rick Bonnema decided to leave Las Vegas in the fall of 1992, he knew his life would change one way or another. Along with his wife, Karen, and 7-year-old daughter, Megan, Bonnema was hitting the road to a better life that he wasn’t finding beneath the lights of Sin City.

While in Las Vegas, Bonnema and Karen, already three years into a heroin addiction, were in trouble. Stealing and dealing with the wrong kind of people on a daily basis, Bonnema was a full-blown junkie. Spending every minute of everyday finding and getting “fixes” for him and his wife, Bonnema had lost control, and the drugs had fully taken over his life. He couldn’t live without them.

“One time in the parking lot where we were picking up the heroin from, the people didn’t show up in time,” Bonnema said. “By the time the runner did finally show up, I was on all fours puking because I was so sick and needed it. Karen had to shoot me up while I was puking so that I could puke again just to be well. Every time you shoot up, you would get sick.”

Bonnema, who is originally from Minnesota, was on his way back home to check himself into rehab for his roughly $200-a-day heroin addiction that eventually led him through Wyoming.

Bonnema’s wild, life-consuming, out of control habit, which he said came about after suffering from back problems, was destroying his life, and on Sept. 26, 1992, his lifestyle of consumption and reckless abandon spiraled out of control.

Living right:
Rick Bonnema, who is in his 14th year as senior architectural maintenance technician at Laramie County Community College, has been living a new, normal life and is enjoying every minute of it, drug-free.

While making the trek to Minnesota, Bonnema and Karen, dope sick on heroin, made a decision that will haunt him the rest of his life.

To kill the agonizing pain of being sick on heroin, Bonnema walked into a drugstore in Rawlins, Wyo., seeking prescription narcotics. When the pharmacist declined, Bonnema pulled out a black, pistol-shaped BB gun and demanded pills. Bonnema left $17 on the counter and hit the road heading east on Interstate 80.

Just 46 miles down the road in Elk Mountain, Wyo., the Wyoming Highway Patrol had set up a roadblock, and Bonnema’s life would never be the same.

“I left $17 for a Class A narcotic to help me and Karen quit being sick,” Bonnema said. “They said that I needed a prescription. Well, here’s my prescription, and I pulled a BB gun out. It was either that or Karen was going to take Megan and leave. She would’ve just wandered the streets and eventually found something. We were both sick.”

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~Rick Bonnema
I can look back at that lifestyle, and it was nothing but sheer hell for me, and I didn’t want that. I wanted to go back to my old life, like back before I went into the service as far as the hunting and fishing and things like that.

I wanted to live a normal life.

~Rick Bonnema

After being sentenced one to three years, Bonnema had lost it all. His wife went to prison for accessory; his daughter lived with grandparents in Las Vegas; and everything he owned was gone. In that instance and moment of clarity while behind the walls, Bonnema realized it was time to make a change for himself and his family.

“Prison changed me,” Bonnema said. “I tried to utilize everything that I could to better myself. I took classes while I was in prison. I got two certificates for mechanical drafting and architectural drafting that helped me get my job here, that and the fact I’ve been a carpenter my whole life.”

After spending two years and eight months behind bars, Bonnema was released for good behavior and the programs he had completed in prison. Already earning college credits, Bonnema decided to lay down new roots in Cheyenne after nearly a three-year prison sentence.

The life of drugs and crime were over for Bonnema.

“I just didn’t want that lifestyle ever again,” Bonnema said. “I was sick of being sick. I was sick of the whole scenario, the people you get involved with, the things you have to do to support it, all of it. You aren’t afraid of anything, and you aren’t thinking straight when you are on heroin.”

A longtime friend, Kevin Neumeyer, met Bonnema in prison and reconnected with him at a minimum security lockup in Cheyenne.

“Rick has come a long way, and I am so happy to see him finally living a drug-free, happy life,” Neumeyer said. “Rick is a good guy and a great friend, and it is truly amazing what he has done with his life. He came from nothing, and he really turned his life around.”

With a clean slate, and his family together again, Bonnema not only got a fresh start in life and school, he also landed a full-time job at LCCC in the maintenance plant where he could use the skills learned in prison and return to his first love of carpentry that he learned from his grandfather.

Times were still hard for Bonnema and his family in Cheyenne as Karen continued to struggle with her addiction, going to work and applying his construction trade skills and earning a living. With a clean slate, and his family together again, Bonnema not only got a fresh start in life and school, he also landed a full-time job at LCCC in the maintenance plant where he could use the skills learned in prison and return to his first love of carpentry that he learned from his grandfather.

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