

*Back to where I started*

# Dropout who thought life was over at 21 turned back on prestige job to return to 'basics'

By JEFF SALLOT

At 21, Andrew Spowart thought his life was over.

He was an unemployed Grade 7 dropout who had been in trouble with the law, and he saw no hope for the future.

He thought of these things as he stood on a bridge overlooking the Welland Canal, "planning to pack it in."

In desperation, he recalled in a recent interview, "I prayed for God's help." Mr. Spowart found the courage to walk away from the bridge and to begin rebuilding his life.

Mr. Spowart, 43, now is a North York teacher helping children with learning problems—problems very similar to those he faced when he was a failing grade school pupil.

He has three university degrees, including advanced degrees in psychology and education, and three Ontario teaching certificates; he has held positions of influence and prestige with various school boards; he has lectured at universities. By the standards of his fellow educators he was a success, a man on the way up.

But four years ago he walked away from the prestige jobs as well, preferring to return as a teacher to a classroom—"the place where you find out what education is all about."

"It's ironic, I guess, but I'm back where I started when I was a kid," Mr. Spowart said. "The big jobs and the prestige are not the answer if you haven't come to terms with yourself."

Mr. Spowart was born in Welland.

His family was poor, and school, which should be "a place for warmth and understanding," was neither of those things for him.

"I had a poor family, I had poor clothes on. I would come to school with holes in my pants. I believe I was emotionally disturbed. School should be the most therapeutic place on earth for kids from deprived areas. But I didn't find that."

Instead, Mr. Spowart said, he frequently was singled out by classmates and teachers for ridicule because of his poor academic performance. "I was just trying to survive."

He failed in Grade 3 and again in Grade 7. At that point he decided he had had enough of school and dropped out. "I got shot down early. I gave up."

The remainder of his adolescence was spent drifting. He worked for a while setting pins in a bowling alley, 10 hours a day. At three cents a line his weekly take-home pay came to \$12.

"I hated every minute of it. I was humiliated. I'd get very upset whenever a teacher or one of the kids from school came into the bowling alley. I would sneak down for a coke or hamburger so nobody would see me."

He fought in Golden Gloves competitions in Buffalo, but decided after being knocked out twice that he wasn't a fighter. "Fighting in the Golden Gloves was a signal . . . a sign that I was trying to find recognition."

He hung around pool halls and travelled with an unsavoury crowd, he said, and before he was 18 he had been in eight scrapes with the law. Most of the offences were minor—street fighting and under-age drinking. But he was once caught breaking into a grocery store, he said. The judge placed him on probation and warned him that one more offence would mean a jail term.

In his drifting he once spent an entire day riding a street car in Toronto because he didn't have any money and had no place to go. On another occasion he hitchhiked to Montreal and spent his nights sleeping in the back seats of cars.

At 18 he got a job in a steel factory, pushing a wheelbarrow. He was laid off at 21. "I was back on the streets and in the pool rooms. I was close to the edge emotionally. I had a tremendous feeling of loneliness and despair." That's when he went to the bridge.

He prayed, he said, and God's grace and guidance lifted him from his despair.

He decided that he would try to get into the air force. Five times he took the air force intelligence test and failed.

"One lousy IQ test was keeping me from what I wanted to do." On the sixth try he passed.

"I did well in basic training and I started to get some confidence when I saw I could make it on the parade square and in the classroom."

During his military service Mr. Spowart was able to complete Grade 12 studies through correspondence courses. An educational officer had tried to discourage his studies "because he thought I couldn't do it. His negative remarks made me defiant and determined to prove him wrong."

"In the next 2½ years I read 70 textbooks and I did 400 assignments in those books. I didn't have a teacher. But I got help from other airmen who had their high school education."

When he was discharged at 25 he returned to Wel-