



IN SIGHT

Helping you improve the quality of your personal & professional life.

Issue No. 39

AUGUST 2000

ADDICTED TO HEROIN

When I began law school in the early 1990s I knew I would soon become versed in contracts, property law, and secured transaction, but I *didn't* know I would spend the next three years living with a rapidly progressing, all-consuming, and near-fatal heroin addiction.

What follows is a brief account of my addiction to heroin – a drug that knows no limits on race, sex, age, status, or intellect – and the miracle of my recovery. Life for me now is once again blessedly far from the terror, loneliness, and despair that I endured at the end of a syringe full of heroin.

IT ONLY TAKES FOUR DAYS

Heroin, *diacetylmorphine*, is a naturally occurring opiate derived from the opium poppy. The drug is broken down by the liver into morphine molecules that act on receptors in the brain and central nervous system to produce a euphoria or “high” feeling and, usually, various degrees of sedation. This “high” can last from a few minutes to six hours or more, depending on the purity of the heroin and one’s tolerance for the drug. Heroin can be snorted in powder or liquid form; smoked in solid “tar” form; ingested or eaten in liquid, powder, or solid “tar” form; or dissolved in plain tap water and injected into a vein (commonly called “mainlining” or “IV”), the subcutaneous tissue (known as “skin-popping”), or muscle tissue (called “muscling it”). Heroin is now a relatively cheap drug, more widely available to “mainstream America” than at any time before. A pea-sized bag or “balloon” costs only \$20 and is all that many addicts need to develop the intense craving and profound physical symptoms associated with a full-blown heroin habit. That craving can take as few as four days to set in motion. Once this occurs, a heroin habit is born. Few addicts can successfully quit for any appreciable length of time without professional treatment and a strong personal

commitment to a personal recovery program.

IT STARTED AS PAIN RELIEF

From the outside I do not appear to be the stereotypical, full-fledged, card-carrying “junkie.” I am a white, married, thirty-something woman with two children, who lives in the suburbs, far from the dirt-stained streets of Portland’s Eastside where I found the source of my journey into a living hell. (I quickly learned that East Burnside is to heroin what the local Espresso Bar is to caffeine.)

I started using heroin after an accident that left me in constant pain. Attempts to control the pain with legal medications, physical therapy, and medical treatments were fruitless and I was feeling hopeless. One evening I related my tale of woe to a friend, who told me about a drug called “tar” and offered me a “try.” Without much fanfare, I took my first “snort” of heroin and thought, “This is IT! This is what I’ve been looking for! But heroin...?” Little did I know that heroin was fast becoming in the 1990s what cocaine had been in the late 1970s and 80s: cheap, widely available, and increasingly prevalent in America’s professional middle and upper classes. For two days after I used heroin that first time I was totally pain free, but before long I would know a new, deeper pain far worse than anything I had yet experienced.

THE DRUG OWNED ME

Within a few months, I had reached the point where I would risk everything to get my drug of choice. My addiction threatened to take away my promising law career, my loving marriage, my precious family, and eventually my life. I became obsessed with the drug and worried constantly about getting more. I detested the people I had to deal with to obtain it and feared what would happen if my addiction was discovered.

At this point, I was clearly addicted, both physi-

cally and mentally, and it was beginning to show. I was losing weight and my skin had become a gray-yellow color. I bled easily and my hair began falling out. I didn't sleep well because of the withdrawal symptoms that would usually start about three hours after my last use. I developed chronic bronchitis from months of smoking heroin, and I had literally dozens of "track marks" at any given time from repeated self-injections. Within weeks, I would overdose for the first time.

Despite all of this, I could not quit and continued to use heroin on a daily basis. Some days I would use eight to ten times. What had begun as a \$20-a-day habit grew to over \$1,100 a day by the last week of my heroin use.

LIFE AND DEATH

My increasing tolerance and appetite for heroin was a textbook case of opiate addiction. I required more and more of the drug to achieve the characteristic warm, flushed, and relaxed feeling of my earlier highs. When I initially began using, I would feel "high," or "well," for the first four or five hours; but then I would start to feel "sick" with withdrawal symptoms by early afternoon. I was cold all the time and had severe aching and pain in my joints – as if I were getting the flu. I began to have headaches, chills, and abdominal pain on a daily basis. The only way I could stop these "mild" symptoms of withdrawal was to use more often and in larger amounts.

Eventually, I came to a point where I had to either seek help to quit or continue using and die. It happened after my third overdose. I had previously failed five heroin detox programs in as many months, and I feared inpatient treatment to the point that I would panic and run before I could even get through the admission process. I became so sick, so emaciated, and in so much physical and emotional pain that I used lethal amounts. I was more afraid of living with my addiction than I was of dying from it.

I felt hopeless and heart broken, to a degree that I had never experienced in my life. I was at a point where nothing mattered. I had to make a decision: continue to use and face a certain future of jails, institutions, and death, or become willing to do whatever it took to stay alive, get clean, and learn to live

without heroin. Through my desperation, I became "willing," as the program of Narcotics Anonymous suggests, to do whatever it took.

THE MIRACLE OF RECOVERY

With the help and support of my family and an addiction specialist, I was hospitalized for heroin withdrawal for 32 days. I then spent the next four months in an inpatient treatment center that focused on learning to live day by day without the ritual of heroin use, which had been central to my existence. My inpatient treatment was followed by two years of intensive individual treatment on an outpatient basis.

While in treatment I became involved with Narcotics Anonymous (NA), a twelve-step program for recovering addicts based on the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. I also started attending a local support group for recovering attorneys. It was at these meetings I found my NA sponsor, a miracle of a woman with nearly eighteen years of recovery who mentors me in my spiritual and day-to-day life.

I have learned many lessons from the other recovering addicts, but no lesson has been more important to me than the saying, "We had to go through what we went through to get where we're at." Today I love where I am at. The miracle of being able to go from overdosing, which left me unable to read and write, to writing out my journey for others to read is by no means lost on me. When I say I am grateful, and I do on a daily basis, I truly mean it.

It has been nearly two and a half years since I last used heroin. I regularly attend NA meetings and participate in the various Oregon Attorney Assistance Program groups and workshops available to recovering attorneys and their families. I am also involved in recovery service work in my community. By sharing my experience, strength, and hope at many of the same hospitals and institutions where I was an overdose patient, I try to help addicts who are still suffering. I do this because I was told in Narcotics and Alcoholics Anonymous that as recovering persons, "we can only keep what we have (our recovery) by giving it away."

FREEDOM TO LIVE AGAIN

Today I can honestly say that I am a different per-

son than I was three years ago. I have witnessed, through my own recovery and work with others, that no addict is hopeless. Freedom from the bondage of drugs, despair, and death is available to every addict with a desire to recover. For me, life began to change when I became willing to chase my recovery with the same determination I once chased a bag of heroin. One of the great promises of recovery is this: what was once our greatest liability will become our greatest asset.

On a Much Better Track