

ARE YOU A TWEAK ER?

VOICES **OF THE**®
FELLOWSHIP

Is speed a problem in your life?
Are you an addict? **Only you** can
answer those questions.

WORKING AN HONESTY PROGRAM

As an adopted baby who came from a loving home, I've always been somewhat of a people-pleaser trying to fit in. My family was a "clean your plate" kind of family so I grew up a heavy kid. As a teenager I was always trying to reinvent the wheel, when I wasn't taking it apart. All of the kids in school growing up were very mean, so I got teased all of the time. My parents were foster parents for disabled children, which meant that I was taking care of kids all the time.

I grew up next to a mall where I learned to steal small things like lipstick, but I never got caught. I started drinking in high school wanting to fit in. I went straight for the hard stuff—stealing liquor out of my parent's liquor cabinet and replacing it with water. It was during that time I saw this movie called *The Best Little Girl in the World*, about a girl with an eating disorder who lost weight and it really changed me. I dropped 45 pounds in one summer soon after seeing this movie. The people who didn't like me or wanted nothing to do with me in the past were suddenly my friends. That's pretty heavy stuff when you are impressionable and a teenager just trying to fit in somewhere. At 17 years old I finished high school and moved out of my parents' house. I was now an adult. That preceded all of my really bad decisions like partying. I tried to put myself back in school and all my friends were smoking pot. Some of the kids my parents took care of were told by their doctors that the reason they had disabilities was because their parents did drugs. So I was very anti-drugs for a long time.

My friends were all smoking pot so I thought, Well if they're going to do it I should just sell it to them to make sure they

got the right stuff. My 'no-drugs' policy turned into smoking three-quarters of an ounce a day. Of course, people are really motivated when they're high, so my school discipline just went down the toilet. This started my reckless descent—drinking heavily, smoking pot, and working stupid jobs just to support it. By the time I was 21 years old, I had three DUIs thanks to being grandfathered in Minnesota to the 19-year-old drinking age. I never wanted to give up my keys, because that meant I would have to give up the controls to my partying. I was in and out of jail and was one of those people that didn't listen. My friends at the party would say, "You can't drive!" and I would say, "But I have a perfectly running car." By the time I left the state in 1989, I had been jailed over 42 times.

I knew I needed to do something different, so I decided to go back to school for something I really wanted to do—to become a motorcycle mechanic. In order to get back to school, I had to first pay back the old school loans. So I went to treatment for the first time in order to save money spent on alcohol. I worked two jobs, actually saved up enough money, and stayed sober for a while. I moved to Arizona. Six hours after moving there I started drinking to celebrate the move. I picked up right where I left off. I graduated Motorcycles Mechanics Institute as a Certified Mechanic and moved back to Minnesota. Shortly thereafter, I landed a great job at the local Harley Davidson dealership. My old drinking buddies wanted to celebrate, but I said, "No, I worked my butt off to get here, I'm not going to blow it." Three beers later, I found myself in the back of a squad car.

When I got out of jail and went to work on Monday, I got called to my manager's office. When I got there he was pacing back and forth and said, "Do you want to tell me what happened this weekend? I know you got busted. Want to tell me what happened?" I replied, "I don't know what you're talking about." After all, how would he know that I got arrested? Turns out my boss (who was a Harley Davidson dealership owner) used to be the Ramsey County Sheriff and still had buddies in the department. Because of my prior arrest and convictions, the prosecuting attorney said they were going to give me two-and-a-half years for that arrest. So I left. That was how I handled things, I just left. I moved back to Arizona and started working in a 24-hour pool hall. The only people that go to a 24-hour pool hall are tweakers. Back then it was known as crank. One night, this guy asked me if I wanted to try some and that was my introduction into meth. I was instantly—instantly—hooked. Four days later, I was on the couch with earphones and a scotch playing air drums thinking

this was the coolest thing ever. I didn't need to worry about the law anymore because I never left the sofa. I didn't need to worry about gaining weight again because I never ate. It was the coolest tool. Why aren't more people on it?

One of the things that I did while I was high was think about 50 million ways to make free money. I became a tornado of destruction set loose on society. I became something I swore I would never become. I cashed checks, stole people's identity, and many other felony offenses. My conscience was gone. By the time I got arrested, I needed to be arrested. That first time I got caught with somebody's cards, I was busted and went to jail. That was my first experience with an Arizona jail. Eleven months later when we went to court the prosecuting attorney wanted to give me five years, but since it was a first-time offense they gave me three-and-a-half years. I did my time and was out. The day after I was released, I hooked up with one of my friends' boyfriends who was a meth cook. I didn't want to get high, but I didn't have any structure or tools or a program. Six days later I was arrested again in Arizona and did another three-and-a-half years.

The first time I did three-and-a-half years I was OK with it. The second time I did time, I was really pissed off. That guy I hooked up with went back to his ex-wife. When I got out of prison in Arizona, I decided not to stay in that state. I counted sixteen felonies at the time and decided to go back to Minnesota. Well, shortly after arriving, thanks to that unresolved DUI way back when, I was arrested on an illegal U-turn again and put back in jail. I got probation and decided to go back to treatment. I was thinking about the things I needed to get back, not about what I needed to do to get better. When you hang around people that buy stolen merchandise, they are probably all using drugs. I had multiple addictions at this point, not just using meth. I completed that treatment but didn't change my behavior. It was just a matter of time before I started using again and got another DUI. That made seven, count them, seven DUIs. I didn't want to run checks or do that kind of thing anymore, but who was going to give me a job? I knew it was just a matter of time before I was going back to prison. My best thinking, while doing shots of tequila, was to come out of retirement and work just enough to hire an attorney. Thank God they stopped me. Thank God I didn't do any more harm. I was supposed to go in front of this tough judge who had access to all of my prior arrest and convictions in my file. She had just had her purse stolen and someone was running her checks. She was not happy with me. She said I

was going back to prison today and sentenced me to eighteen months. When you do this kind of time, the people around you, like your family, also do the time.

I completed my sentence and knew that if I didn't change people, places, and things I'd wind up back at the dealers again, which is exactly what happened. It was at this time I noticed I was getting anemic, really tired, and feeling sicker and sicker. I was taking so many drugs to stay awake, but found myself sleeping all the time. I just couldn't stay awake. By the time I got arrested with two stolen vehicles in my driveway my physical health was so bad that I just needed a break from using. While in jail I fell asleep on a soft mattress. It was the first time that I had actually fallen asleep laying down in a very long time. I felt this huge bump between my hip bones and I thought that I was pregnant. At intake I told the nurse that I might possibly be pregnant. It turned out to be an eleven centimeter tumor and they scheduled surgery. Because I was so anemic, in order to have surgery I needed to have blood. I always thought that my biker friends would be there when I needed them the most. My hemoglobin levels were at 4 (11 or 12 is normal). I have rare blood. I asked my family if they could donate. I was adopted so I would have to call my friends. I called all of them to see if any would be a match, but none came. It was one of the lowest realizations in my life that I was really alone. Thank God they found the rare blood, and I was able to have the surgery. Soon after surgery I returned back to prison and was feeling better.

When I went back to get my post-surgery hemoglobin checkup, my doctor said that when they removed the tumor, they found cancer and that I would need chemotherapy. That was a harsh and scary realization. Here I am with the loss of privileges, back in my cell for 23 hours a day with nothing to do but to think about this. Now in all of the time I have ever done which was nine-and-a-half years, I was never one of the bible thumpers or religious kinds of people. For the first time I was really scared and thought I was going to die. I thought about all of the damage I had done, and all of society, and the people I had hurt. Why would I be given a second chance? It was the one time that I went back to my room and got on my knees and said I can't do this by myself. I said my first prayer. I said, "God, if you get me through this, I will do everything in my power to stay sober and to keep my word to you." The day I went to my surgery, I got my TV in my room which was expensive—it was like \$200. I got back to my room after surgery for one day, and they told me to pack up, that I was going to treatment.

I had to be open to the signals that were passing me, so I went to treatment. Cognitive thinking behavioral treatment, that's what I got signed up for. This type of treatment focuses not only on alcohol and drugs, but it also focuses on behavioral problems. I got my head in the books and tried to be honest with my counselor. I asked one of my counselors, "Why do I keep doing this over and over again? Why do I keep making the decisions that I make? I have a fairly high IQ. Why do I keep going back to jail?" She said, "Because you don't honor yourself as a person, and don't give yourself a chance at life." I said, "No, that's not it."

The test results came back as I listened to "Jesus Take the Wheel." That song helped me get through a lot. They got all of the uterine cancer, fifty percent of my uterus had cancer, but they got all of it. I got to keep my hair. I was terrified, very, very grateful, but terrified because I had just made a deal with God...and he came through. I didn't have any idea of how to be sober or do anything. I had been stealing and bending rules and breaking rules of society for so long it became second nature. I didn't know how to be sober. I had been given a second chance. I don't know why, but I was given a second chance. I decided to have an open mind, so I listened. I shut my mouth and listened.

When you go to treatment in prison, if you have contact lenses, you can keep them. But they are kind of expensive, so you can get these lovely Sally Jesse Raphael glasses. However, there is a rule that, when you get your glasses, you have to turn in your contact lenses. I mention this because this was one of the most important lessons I had to learn. I didn't do it. I kept my contacts because I thought it was a stupid rule. Why would anyone care how I see? I'm trying to pay attention to their treatment, however they are trying to help me change my life. Someone told on me that I still had my contact lenses. When one of the counselors came up and asked me if I had contact lenses, I said "Yes I do". He said, "OK, I need those." This is how my life worked. I heard him say I need those, not the ones that were still back in my room. So now I am wearing the contact lenses and the stupid glasses looking for the person who ratted me out. I'm not even high and this was how I was acting. It got to the point that they had three officers bring me to medical and look with a flashlight for my own contact lenses. I finally said, "Fine." I was then put in solitary for fifteen days for destroying evidence. So this is how my track record goes. Who does fifteen days in "seg" and thirty days extended incarceration for possessing their own contacts? There is a point to this story. The point is that

I thought it was a pretty insignificant rule so why bother? But when you are working an honesty program, and you are trying to recover from this disease, you need to be honest in every aspect of your life no matter how small or insignificant you think the rule is. If I was going to change my life and do something different, I had to follow every rule.

So even though I thought it was a stupid rule, it was a really big turning point for me because I got kicked out of treatment for breaking it. I had to go back to treatment again after I got out of prison. While in treatment I was introduced to CMA. I heard that people who did 90 meetings in 90 days made it. I heard that I had to change people, places, and things, so I got rid of every phone number in my phone. I heard that if you don't drive illegally you won't go to jail. God I hated that one! I was living in a sober house and got a bicycle and was peddling my butt to every meeting I had to go to. I was willing to go to any length. I wanted to meet as many sober people as I could meet, so I went to every CMA meeting I could. I was on parole and had never successfully completed parole or probation. Never! My parole officer was right down the street from my sober house, and I would just drop in to see if they needed me to drop a urine sample or anything. It got to the point where one of the parole officers had to say, "We will call you when it's time to come in."

I entwined my life with CMA and went to meetings all of the time. After a year sober, I met my husband. The cool thing about having a positive sober network in CMA is being able to talk about everything I needed to talk about in these meetings to stay sober. I needed to be around people that were going to call me on my shit, to be able to talk about issues like stealing and how to change my habit and create a budget, about alcohol, about meth, and about how to live an honesty program one day at a time.

When I went to CMA, I started giving back, cleaning up and emptying ashtrays and being of service. Someone told me that they needed an H&I person at the Intergroup level. They were like, "We don't know how to do that." I told them that I didn't know how to do that either. It was easy to get in! Once I got things worked out, I organized some volunteers and we got CMA meetings into four prisons. Eventually I got my little badge and was able to bring a meeting in myself.

I went to a wedding one time, and the judge whose purse got stolen and sentenced me years before, took one look at me and

said, "Oh my God, you look great! What are you doing?" I told her what I was doing. She has me in her Rolodex now. Weird! Today I sponsor women. Weird! I am a business owner today. Weird! The cool thing is that the promises do come true if I work for them. It wasn't easy. There are days living life on life's terms is hard. I am blessed and honored to meet other people in CMA who do their best to give back.

In June of 2018, I had fifteen years sober. If anyone is in doubt, they can do this. If I can do this, somebody who had nine years in prison, sixteen felonies and seven DUIs, if I can completely turn my life around and be a business owner, a productive member of society, so can you.

MY SWEET CAKE OF RECOVERY

As a child, I was a painfully shy, highly sensitive, delicate little blonde thing. I was smart, eager to please, desperate for love, and felt insignificant next to my tennis prodigy brother. I also struggled to make friends. I was both terrified of being left out and scared of being the focus. Panic-stricken of being seen for what I really was. And in the mind of that self-centered little addict, what I "really was," was boring and mediocre. The core of my disease is that I can't stand myself and I'm afraid that you will figure out that I'm a loser. In fact, I'm afraid of *everything*. I'm just fear wrapped in skin. Oh yeah, and I blame you for that.

I didn't have a great childhood. My father also has this disease; and, when I was about 9 or 10, his addiction spiraled out of control and my family started to disintegrate. His addiction changed us, all of us. He was constantly high, deeply insane, cheating, stealing, abusive, dangerous and frightening. This lasted for years. My mother was changed too. Anger, fear and frustration turned her unforgiving and harsh. I became such an angry girl, no longer eager to please my family or any adults for that matter. My grades swiftly declined. One surprising benefit that came from academic failure was a sliver of social acceptance at school. It was a subtle change, imperceptible to anyone but me, but I was very aware of it and ached for more. I wanted friends so badly, so I ran with it. I took on a bad attitude fast, cared nothing about school, and acquired something I didn't realize I wanted...an "edge." It felt good, and as all good addicts blindly believe, if something feels good, then more will feel better. Once I entered high school, "edgy" was my new persona. I dyed my hair black, started drinking whiskey behind the Sizzler before school, smoked weed at lunch and BAM! I had arrived. I was one

of the cool kids and my problems seemed to have been solved. Getting loaded, hating everything, and not caring about consequences bought me acceptance and relief from the ever-present anxiety and loneliness that had plagued my soul from my earliest memory.

When I went away to college, I found the substance that worked best with my brain chemistry, crystal meth. It became the only thing that mattered to me. My whole life I had wanted to be "something"...beautiful, sexy, smart, popular, charismatic... *anything* but mediocre. I wanted to be loved by friends, respected by my family, adored by a boyfriend, and be perceived as extraordinary. Well, crystal didn't turn me into that person or bring me any of those things, but what it did do for me was something that felt far greater at the time. It stopped me wanting those things altogether. The alcohol, weed, cocaine, ecstasy, heroin etc. had made it possible for me to breathe. Those substances made it possible to be around "you." They helped me socialize with you, have sex with you, and impress you. Crystal meth, however, made you completely irrelevant. I didn't need anyone anymore. I didn't care what you thought of me or if you desired me. It was the greatest relief of my life because people couldn't be counted on and they were constantly breaking my heart and bruising my ego. Crystal meth wiped away all their power; they could no longer hurt, disappoint, reject or abandon me...as long as I had my "product," my weapons of mass destruction, and a bathroom with a door that locked. I found a solution that worked better than anything else ever had. All I needed from the world was to endlessly provide me with money and expect nothing in return but demands, cruelty and manipulation. Too much to ask?

But crystal meth had some demands, too. I became an all-day, all-night user almost right away, and I learned quickly what I needed to do to use the way I needed to use. I built my whole life around my using. I only had friends who used how I used, I only dated or slept with men who used like I used, I only took jobs where I could get away with using, and I cut loose anyone who questioned my drug use or insane behaviors.

The natural progression for me landed me in a relationship with another addict. Our introduction was a Hollywood meet-cute. He was withdrawing from Oxycontin and I had the heroin to cure it. We were drug-induced soulmates. This beautifully tragic man fueled and validated my drug use. We moved in together two days later. We lived and used together for three years. We

absolutely hated each other by month six, but stayed together for the drugs (like parents do children). There was no love, no trust, no kindness, no tenderness between us. But we stayed there, together, because we had no one else. It's a bad spot to be in when the person you despise the most, second only to yourself, is the only person you have left in your life. My drug use siphoned my humanity in all areas of my life. It became impossible to keep a job, let alone find one. Apparently, excusing yourself during a job interview at Target to slam in the bathroom doesn't make a good first impression.

I burned my life to the ground. I was unhirable, friendless, penniless, and car-less. I totaled my car because I took a nap while driving, after staying up for five days on meth. My family wouldn't let me in the house due to the "parasites" I had crawling in my skin (which, apparently, only crystal meth addicts can see). I got kicked out of my apartment because landlords don't like when their tenants live in squalor, have rigs everywhere and spray blood all over the walls when trying to eject a clog out of a rig. All of that was acceptable to me and became my new normal. By the end of my use, I was living in a hotel, 69 pounds, with track marks up and down my arms, veins collapsed...dying, miserable, desperate, and fucking insane. Had I continued to use like that, I was gonna die. I didn't know I was dying, but I knew I was miserable and didn't even consider that my using had anything to do with it. I blamed a million people: my parents, my boyfriend, the current occupant of the White House, etc., etc.... anyone but me. Never me, and certainly never the drug use.

Eventually I got found out. My mother gave me one of two options: Get shipped to rehab in South Africa or die in the street. Strangely, the decision was hard to make, but once the excruciating withdrawal hit, I buckled and agreed to go to rehab in South Africa following a short stint in a local detox facility.

The detox facility was a blur. I remember sex with strangers, a suicide attempt and the unbearable pain. But one thing I remember vividly was the efforts of a phlebotomist to find a vein on the day I was admitted. All of my veins were collapsed and he said he wasn't going to be able to do the draw. I *begged* him to try again. I *needed* to feel a needle in my arm one more time. Nothing else brought me pleasure. I had nothing to look forward to, nothing to be proud of, nothing to live for. The only thing I wanted was to be high, but the drugs had stopped working a long time ago and the world was demanding I get sober. I was bankrupt in every way. I knew the blood draw

wouldn't get me high but I had nothing else. I wanted to die. I think that phlebotomist saw how much pain I was in and took pity on me. He was eventually able to draw from my hand and I cried in gratitude for the gesture of clemency. When finished he held my hands and whispered to me, "It's going to be ok." These were the first kind words I'd heard in years. Of course, I didn't believe him at the time, but looking back, I now see he was right.

After seven days of detox, unable to walk and needing to be wheeled through the airport in a wheelchair, I was accompanied by my brother on a flight to Johannesburg with a bag of benzos the detox had prescribed me. After commandeering the bag, I passed out, and the next thing I remember was exiting the plane in the South African heat, embarrassing my brother with my exposed track marks. I was taken directly to the lockdown rehab facility. I was confronted immediately with a dilemma the day I got admitted: How to square their edict that I couldn't get high anymore with the knowledge that there was no way in hell I could live without getting high. Did they know what they were asking me to do? They couldn't know. If they knew how bad it felt for me to be sober, they would never ask me to do it. I absolutely loathed rehab at first. None of their annoying slogans made sense. Obviously we can only live one day at a time, duh! Ain't nobody lives four days at a time! And how was doing "homework" gonna keep a needle out of my arm? I wasn't gonna be told what to do, I wasn't gonna do your Steps, and I certainly wasn't gonna have "God" crammed down my throat. I'm a homeless, penniless, friendless junky. I know what I'm doing!

So of course the time came when I figured out a way to escape.

Having not lived in South Africa since I was six, I needed a willing hostage who could take me to the nearest drug connect. Thus began my journey with a man named Cliff that included digging a tunnel under the barbed wire fence, trekking miles to the local Nigerian drug lord, dumpster diving to find the tools we would need to get high and sneaking back into the rehab. The sparkling success of that night was all I needed to make the journey alone the next time. I was again at the drug lord's residence, doing whatever I needed to do to get high. The obsession had been released all over again, and that old slogan suddenly made sense. "One is too many and a thousand is never enough." Shit. Did this Twelve Step thing have some validity? Later came the realization that would serve as the platform to my recovery: I had none of the right answers. My thinking was

faulty. I couldn't rely on my own thinking because my best thinking landed me alone and miserable with a needle in my arm.

After being kicked out of rehab, they finally allowed me back. That last relapse had been painful and made me slightly less resistant to the process. But I had no idea how to do this deal called "a sober life," and even my limited view of what happiness was seemed impossible without drugs. No addict wants to have to get sober. We want the drugs to work forever, free of consequences. But that scenario doesn't exist. Working a program or killing myself seemed like my only options, because sobriety without a program is fucking painful. It is worse than being out there for a girl like me. But luckily I had been given the gift of desperation that the book talks about. This disease had beaten me into a state of reasonableness, and I was willing, for the first time, to follow both directions *and* suggestions.

The rehab told me that if I worked a Twelve Step program, the program would provide me with a design for living and show me how to live like a human being and not like an animal. I started working the Steps, even though I believed this program couldn't work for such a broken girl like me. But I did the work despite that belief. And I actually became willing to ante up on what seemed like a useless investment for the slight chance that the pain might stop. Something different was my only option, unless I wanted to die, and I was tired of dying. I was tired of being unhappy. I was tired of being desperate, and I was tired of having to work so hard to feel something other than sick.

So I tried. The pain stayed with me month after month, but I stayed clean. I did what they told me to do. I got a job, I went to meetings, I did my Step Work, I got a sponsor, I called that sponsor, I went to bed at a reasonable hour, I woke up at a reasonable hour, I made my bed, I washed my dishes, I ate three meals a day, I fellowshiped. I followed their instructions to the best of my ability, and I didn't use, no matter what. My sober posse and I now refer to that as the No Matter Fucking What Club.

Time went really slowly. I woke up one morning, at around six months clean, and I started to realize that some changes had occurred. I had been sleeping through the night for at least a week. I actually had fun and laughed the evening before at fellowship. It didn't take all my effort to walk or even breathe as it had before. I was looking forward to the meeting that night,

I would see some friends I'd made. A whole bunch of little miracles started revealing themselves; and all of a sudden, I found myself grateful. For the first time, I believed I had a chance of staying clean. The program was *working!*

At eight months sober, I was instructed to return to the United States and start cleaning up the wreckage of my past. My family in the States had no interest in being in my life, so I called the one friend I had who didn't use. I had been awful to her in my use, but she showed up for me anyway. I didn't deserve her forgiveness or kindness, but *thank God* I don't get what I deserve because if I did, I would probably be in jail or drooling into a cup. I began looking for sober living and a job, and I went to a meeting the first day back. I had nothing but a desire to stay sober and the gift of sobriety.

My first meetings in the States didn't feel safe, and I couldn't find the same quality of fellowship and sobriety that I had found when going to meetings in South Africa. A lot of men tried to get in my pants, and I was too scared to say no because I had no idea *how* to say no. I never had healthy boundaries or healthy relationships. How would I know what "healthy" even looked like? I'd been high since I was 13. Just because I put the drugs down didn't mean I was all of a sudden a healthy human with healthy boundaries, self-esteem, and respect for the boundaries of others. Fuck no, I was still my sick little self, because I hadn't finished my Steps or given this program the time it takes to heal and grow. That's what the Steps are for. Although I was afraid to say no to men, I was even more afraid of relapsing. I started to question whether I could stay sober in the U.S. and began making plans to return to Johannesburg because I was willing to go to any lengths to stay sober. Luckily, my Higher Power placed an angel in my path at a woman's AA meeting in the form of a hot-shot lawyer with fierce shoes and impeccable hair and nails. She was a crystal meth addict in recovery, and of course she spotted the only other tweaker in the room—a talent every tweaker possesses, whether using or sober.

She took me to my first Crystal Meth Anonymous meeting a few days later. That first meeting was unlike any other I had ever been to. People were speaking my language, telling the ugly truth but preaching a fierce solution. It was exactly what I needed. CMA revolutionized my sobriety. And for me, nothing has compared to the quality of its fellowship—a fellowship that loved on me but didn't prey upon me. A fellowship where I can hear the specific details of my disease so I don't forget. A fel-

lowship for gutter tweakers like me. A fellowship that is inclusive. For me, CMA is where the rubber meets the road, where I can laugh my ass off about past debauchery, and where I have found love and support beyond measure.

Yes, I had what some would call a shitty childhood. And I got a lot of mileage out of that and gave myself a lot of permission to use behind it. But I don't have to do that anymore. Because the truth is, I don't need a good reason to use. I'm an addict. I have an allergy of the body, an obsession of the mind, and a malady of the spirit. I'd use if my life was shit, I'd use if my life was peaches and orgasms. Once I start using, I can't stop; and if I'm not working a program, I can't stop myself from starting. I have a disease of perception that makes me the victim, and you the perpetrator. It makes me the loser and you the person who has everything I don't have. It gives me massively high expectations of both the world and myself, leaving no room for imperfection. And when neither the world nor I live up to my unrealistic expectations, my default solution is to medicate my broken heart. Working the Steps of Crystal Meth Anonymous has replaced my desperate need to medicate that hurt. The pain has been replaced with joy.

The Steps are the treatment for the disease of addiction, the way radiation or chemo treat cancer. The Steps are our design for living. It is called a Twelve Step program because, if you don't work the Twelve Steps, it doesn't work. Yes, the Steps can be hard. This program has been the hardest, scariest gift of mercy I have ever been given. Without it I know I would be dead. On completion of Step Four, I knew I had this disease; and the patterns, behaviors, and thought processes revealed to me on that inventory were terrifying. But that terror gave way to willingness, and that willingness gave way to everything else. The Steps paved my path to freedom.

Today I have friends that I don't screw over. I have a job that I show up to on time. I eat and sleep (every day). I shower and brush my teeth (every day). My mother doesn't pay my rent, I do. The clothes I wear and the money I have in my pocket aren't stolen. The things I say to you are actually true. I don't tape the blinds shut. I don't think my apartment is bugged. I don't hate the sound of birds chirping in the morning because I haven't slept all night and have to go to work soon. I don't see bugs in my skin, nor do I spend hours trying to tweeze them out of my arms, face, and genitals. I don't jar my urine because I am too afraid to leave the bedroom. And unless you're an

addict like me or a loved one who watched me go down, you'd have no idea what an absolute fucking miracle that is!

I have built my life around my recovery just as I had built my life around my using. The majority of my friends are in recovery. I don't have friends who use. I don't date men who use. I don't date men who don't support my recovery. I won't work a job that takes away from my program. I am willing to drive an hour to hit a meeting, just as I was willing to drive an hour to connect with the dealer. I am certain today that there is no solution in using. When I convince myself that the solution is getting high, my life gets dark, everything gets worse, and I sell my spirit for a baggie.

This program isn't for people who need it. It isn't even for people who want it. All dying addicts need it, and most of us want it. This program is for people who *work* it. If you work it, it works. Even if you think you don't need it. Even if you think you're too broken. Even if you fucking hate it and want it to fail; it won't, not if you work it. That is the magic that saved my life. When I first went to rehab, I thought this program wasn't necessary. After I worked the First Step, I was convinced I was too sick to be saved. But I worked it anyway, because I had nowhere else to go. It was the last house on the block. I worked it and it worked. And fifteen years later, it is still working. It still works because I haven't changed anything that worked at the beginning. Why would I change what works? Why would I risk decreasing my odds of success when I've already proven what keeps me sober? The odds are not good to begin with for people who use the way I used, why would I put obstacles in my way?

There are six ingredients in what I like to call "my sweet cake of recovery." Meetings. Sponsorship. Step work. Higher Power. Service. Fellowship. As everyone knows, if you want to make something you see in a cookbook, you have to follow that recipe to the letter. You don't leave out ingredients, you don't mess with the measurements, and you don't substitute baking soda for sugar. If I don't include all the ingredients, I don't get my sweet cake at the end of it. Our recipe is right there in the Big Book and available to *anyone* who wants it. Maybe you don't like sweet cake... maybe you like eating shit cake, I don't know. If shit cake is your deal, that is absolutely your right; but I don't recommend it. Cafeteria recovery doesn't work for me. I don't get to pick and choose what parts of the program I want to work. I work every part of this program because that's what it

takes for me to stay sober. That's what it takes to survive this powerful and insidious disease centered in my mind. I've got a lot on the line. My whole damn life is on the line and I know it. I have worked a very solid Step One and I am under no illusion that I can drink or use substances like normal men and women. Once I start, I can't stop; and if I don't work a program, I can't stop myself from starting.

CMA is the only thing I have ever seen transform a dying, insane, daily crystal meth addict into a human being. This program didn't "give me back my life." My life sucked, I didn't want that life back. It gave me a *new* life. Today my life is unrecognizable from what it was fifteen years ago. The girl I once was would've resented the hell out of who I am today, LOL. And yes, sometimes this new life is hard. Life on life's terms is the only offer on the table; not just for addicts, but for all. CMA doesn't make my life perfect; it makes it possible.

BROUGHT IN FROM THE COLD

Someone brought me in from the cold, dark depths of my addiction to a light, warm, and loving room filled with people who care. My life as an addict changed through the years. Through the trials of my addiction, many people came into my life and saved or guided me to a better path.

It was hard to be openly gay growing up in a small, redneck, religious town. It didn't help being brought up in a strong Hispanic Catholic family. My life was sheltered due to my upbringing. My dad had a cousin who was flamboyantly gay. He was the outcast of the family and was spoken of badly by others in the community. I knew I was gay by the age of 10 and I had to hide it because of my dad's cousin. I developed shame for being gay at that early age.

At the age of 16, I found an outlet to express myself while hiding my sexuality. I discovered modeling. I was approached by a company to model kid's clothes, and things took off from there. It helped that I grew up close to a large city within driving distance. My parents bought me my first car, which enabled me to attend modeling events in the big city. This was my big break because I was away from my parents and for the first time, and I could truly be myself.

One day at one of my modeling events, I met Michael, who was a year older than me. We started to talk. I learned he was gay and out to his parents. We started to hang out a lot. He was the first person who made me feel safe about being myself. He asked me if I had ever tried drugs or drank anything. I replied no because my parents kept me on a tight rein. He pulled out a

bottle of vodka he'd taken from his parents. We then shared our first drink. I didn't like the feeling at first, but I came to like it a lot later.

As our friendship grew, we started to like each other a lot more and we became boyfriends. We decided to go dancing together. We found a nightclub open to 18-year olds. We were having so much fun on the dance floor. We decided to take a break from dancing, and we were approached by this guy and his boyfriend. They offered us a little bag of white stuff and this little blue pill. I later learned that the white stuff was cocaine, and the blue pill was ecstasy. Me and my boyfriend said we never tried anything like that. We agreed to try it if we kept an eye on each other. From my first use I felt like I was flying. It was an amazing feeling unlike anything I've felt before. We hung out with this couple the rest of the night. I wanted more of this stuff because I loved the way it made me feel. At the same time, it scared me, so I didn't use anymore that night.

After dating Michael for two years, he finished high school and moved away to college. I was alone and scared again with one year left in high school. I reverted back to hiding my sexuality. I became one of the popular kids in school, but felt lonely inside because I could not be my true self anywhere.

I survived high school, and by the late 1980s I started college. I decided to move away so I could be myself without any judgment from my family or my hometown friends. College was freeing. One of the first things I did was join a gay organization on campus. I wanted to surround myself with people like me. This is where I met my next boyfriend of four years. This was also a time I experienced incredible grief from the loss of some of my new friends to AIDS. In addition, this was the beginning of my binge drinking and occasional use of cocaine to cover up my grief and shame.

After finishing college, I accepted a job as a medical auditor in Los Angeles. This was my first attempt at sobriety. I decided to leave my using, drinking, and the boyfriend behind me. I didn't know anyone in the city, and things were hard and lonely for me. Then I met my next boyfriend, Aldo. We lived a very good and healthy life without using and drinking for the first five years.

After five years together, Aldo and I moved to Austin for my career. The next five years would include a career change for me to real estate. In that time, Aldo contracted HIV and passed it on

to me. This was the end of our relationship and the beginning of my spiral out of control.

I started to travel a lot because of my job. Before I knew it, I was reunited with cocaine. I wanted to cover up the hurt and pain of having HIV. I felt like life was not worth living, and I doubted I'd ever have a person in my life that would love me because of the HIV. My cocaine use progressed within a year, and it went hand-in-hand with risky sex at the bathhouses, sex parties, and circuit parties.

I was traveling for work when I met this guy online who wanted to hang out. I went to his place, then he proceeded to ask if I had ever tried crystal. I said no. He took a pipe out, then took a hit off it, then passed it over to me. I was very nervous and didn't know what to expect. I took that first hit. I thought I inhaled a cloud from heaven. At that point, I knew my life had changed. I was in love, so I thought, with crystal and with this man that I had just met.

I continued dating this guy, who became physically and mentally abusive, for over two years. I knew I could not get out of this relationship. I was so blinded by him, the abuse, and the drugs. The physical and mental abuse was getting worse, but I was in love. I became dependent on him and crystal. I knew I would not find another person who would love me and accept me because of my HIV.

I was suffering so much. My physical appearance and health were taking a toll. Self-care was nonexistent. I left my job in real estate because my health was getting worse. I almost died in the hospital three times from pneumonia, but continued my life with the abusive boyfriend and crystal. They became the loves of my life. I was using crystal every day. Then one day, I had enough. I told my boyfriend I could not be with him anymore, because I didn't want to live anymore. My self-esteem was shot, and I never thought a healthy trusting relationship with another man was possible.

I decided to plan out my last big hurrah in a different city! I was meeting this so-called friend to party all weekend, so that I could use enough crystal to give me the courage to end my life. Things went worse than I planned. This person had a plan for me that I did not know. He drugged my drink and then shot me up with crystal. I blacked out for 48 hours and woke up to being raped by several strangers. I didn't remember how I got

to this place with these people. I was finally able to get dressed and run out the door. I found my car and drove for four hours attempting to go home. I was so high I could not keep my eyes open. I stopped at a friend's place so he could take me to the hospital. By this point, I truly wanted to kill myself. I could not stop crying. The doctor asked if I was willing to do anything to help myself. I said "yes."

I was admitted to detox for a week before being sent to a rehab for 90 days. I needed help because I couldn't stop using. The abuse of my ex-boyfriend and nearly losing my job was a wakeup call. While in rehab, I decided to do anything and everything I could to better myself. I recall getting up every morning and climbing this hill to join a group called Seekers. We would have a short Twelve Step meeting every morning and then watch the sunrise. At those meetings I would cry and ask my Higher Power for help. When I completed my 90 days, I started attending AA meetings because that's where the counselors in rehab told me to go.

After three months of going to AA meetings, a friend told me about a CMA meeting being held once a week. I went to that meeting. I walked in not knowing what to expect. I sat down and listened as people shared. It was a mixed crowd, but it didn't matter as they used crystal like I did. I finally realized I was not alone. There were people like me, and they were talking about my life, my feelings, and my thoughts out loud. These early experiences helped me develop the courage to start attending LGBTQ Twelve Step meetings.

I met my sponsor Scott at my first LGBTQ AA meeting. I told him I was attending AA meetings at another clubhouse because I was not ready to deal with being around gay men. The LGBTQ meetings helped me develop comfort and extinguish shame around being gay which I carried for many years.

Around the time of my one-year sober anniversary, a CMA meeting was created at an LGBTQ recovery clubhouse. I started attending these meetings and put myself back into the gay community in order to continue facing my fears about being around gay men. After a year and half of going to CMA meetings, I built a strong sober family in recovery. I felt my program was getting stronger, and I'd never have to use crystal again.

I planned a vacation to Los Angeles for my birthday. I called a few friends to meet me at my hotel room. One of my friends

brought crystal. I hadn't been around crystal or seen it since I walked into recovery. I was so tempted by it and I relapsed. The problem, I realized, was I forgot about the paranoia I go through when using crystal. I told my friend to leave after only using for one day.

Stuck in Los Angeles and high—I needed help. I was in a state of paranoia and *crazy*. There was a large event being held at my hotel for two foreign dignitaries and a lot of FBI agents all around the hotel because of a bomb threat. This made things feel a lot worse than it was. I didn't want to leave my hotel room, and at the same time I knew I needed a meeting.

I didn't know where the CMA meetings were. I eventually called my sponsor and started reaching out to my friends back home. I told them I relapsed in this strange city. I was crying so much—I needed help. I received a call from one of my friends who reached out to a friend of theirs, who then reached out to another friend of theirs, who lived in L.A. This stranger in L.A. called me and asked if I would like to go to a meeting. I said yes. I never met this person in my life. His name was Marc. Marc told me about a meeting happening that night and he was going to pick me up from my hotel so we could go together. He took me to my first L.A. CMA meeting, and he spent the next two days with me before I flew back home. I realized this was my Higher Power working for me by connecting me with this man. The power of the fellowship!

When I returned home, my sponsor picked me up from the airport and drove us directly to a CMA meeting. At the meeting, I started to tell my story of the crazy experience I just went through in Los Angeles. I picked up my desire chip to stay sober. At that moment, I made a conscious decision that no matter what I wanted to stay sober.

I restarted my program by attending CMA meetings almost every day. I started to volunteer with our local CMA group, and at every LGBTQ recovery event being held. Before I knew it, I was serving on our CMA business committee. Then I became the chair for the CMA Group. I built a strong fellowship of CMA addicts around me. I even started to sponsor people.

After I established some clean time, thoroughly worked the Twelve Steps, and sponsored others, I wanted to give back to CMA on a different level. I ran for and was elected as the next CMA delegate for the state of Texas. In addition, I was elected

to serve as a board member for the LGBTQ recovery clubhouse where my CMA home group meeting is held.

As I became more involved in my program, I wanted to experience my first CMA convention. I returned to Los Angeles for CMALA. This was my first trip back to L.A. since my relapse. I surrounded myself with old and new friends from CMA. The convention was such a profound and enlightening experience, and I wanted to go to conventions in other cities. I continued my journey by attending the first Gay and Sober Men Conference in New York City. It was the first of its kind. This conference helped me focus on my gay shame issues, and I created great friendship in the gay recovery community around the nation.

For my fourth year of sobriety, I returned to Los Angeles to take a cake at a Saturday morning CMA meeting. I called my L.A. friend Marc and asked him to give me a cake and celebrate my anniversary with me. I recall talking to a friend about my L.A. relapse story, and what Marc did for me. Marc was that guy who brought me in from the cold. In recovery, there is often someone who brings a newcomer to their first meeting, or simply shares their experience, strength, and hope so the newcomer who is using drugs or alcohol can find their way; it is a divine intervention.

My recovery became my life, my journey, and my future. Having a strong recovery fellowship made me a better person. I give back by staying connected and bringing newcomers in from the cold.

I WAS LIVING WITH AN ADDICT... IT WAS ME

When my oldest daughter was five our car broke down in the middle of town. We lived twenty miles away in the canyons outside of Redlands, California. I had no money or cell phone back then so I told her to stick out her thumb and we'd get a ride. Being the bright child that she was, my daughter was not OK with this idea. I told her it was safe because I had a loaded gun in my purse.

A few weeks later, I told that same daughter to grab me a soda, bring her sister's diaper bag, and several other things to which she replied, "Mommy, you're going too fast." And I was going too fast because I had done about a half an 8 ball of meth already that day. It was 10 a.m. I was an abusive and unpredictable parent. I was not much better at being a wife, daughter or friend either.

We had lots of guns back then. Meth addicts are paranoid. We were no exception. I lived in Redlands with my two kids and my husband. We had an open marriage because neither one of us could keep a commitment. I had uncontrollable sexual desires. In addition to the kids and the husband, my boyfriend lived with us, too.

I had been using drugs and drinking since age 11 or 12 and the last seven years using mostly meth. I never used occasionally, it was daily from the get-go. I was completely out of my mind. My days were full of anger, rage, and delusions. I was sure someone was watching us and I would stare out of the windows for hours. We lived in the desert...nothing was out there and I can see that we were not that important. We were dealing and were certainly

eligible for the attention of law enforcement, but as far as I know, we were not on their radar at that time.

In the end, I kicked my husband out because he was useless, and two weeks later kicked the boyfriend out because he was doing something wrong. I have no idea what that was—I just knew he had to go. Being the mature adult that I was, I packed up my two kids in six boxes and called my parents to see if I could come back home to St. Louis, Missouri. The parents said yes and we flew home a week later. Thank God for denial! I had been a horrible daughter. I stole, lied, was abusive, and ungrateful for most of my teens and twenties.

I moved into the basement I had occupied before my marriage where the walls were painted black and the black light posters remained. We did our best to make things work but I continued to drink and use meth for about six more months. We lived on my kids' SSI money and food stamps.

My parents, who adopted me at birth, knew something was up and suggested I go to counseling. I had no other options as I was unable to work or find care for my kids. Both my daughters are special needs kids. Back then no treatment centers were taking women with kids. I could not remember to give my youngest her seizure medicine and could not remember when they last ate, because I was not eating much at the time.

I met my future ex-husband on New Year's Eve. We partied and hung out and fought again. He told me I would never change and he never wanted to see me again. I was a mess, I just didn't realize how bad off I was. Amphetamine psychosis, neglecting my kids, shooting guns, screwing everyone, and breaking all the doors and windows in our trailer were the high points of my life at that time. I needed something, I was not sure what that was.

I started to see a counselor and he suggested that I go to a 12 Step group—AA, NA, OA, Alanon, CA, AcoA, or whatever. Today I qualify for all of these and then some. CMA wasn't around then. That would have been my first choice. I attended my first 12 Step meeting in October of 1988 and ended up at an Alanon meeting. I listened to the wives talk about the unreliable husbands they were married to and how they never knew who was going to come through the door at night. Would it be the jolly party man or the angry abusive wall puncher?

After a few weeks I realized that I was living with an addict...it was me! I started going to AA because the recovery was good and it gave me hope. AA was good but there were a lot of things that I could not share with the blue-haired ladies in the AA meetings.

I enrolled in school at a Community College and attended eight meetings a week for my first four years, had a sponsor, home group, and was involved with District and Area Service work. I stayed clean and sober for six months! It seemed like forever!

My mom had been sick with cancer off and on for years. She had bone cancer and it was not looking good. My mom and I did not get along at all. We fought constantly. My sponsor kept telling me to say the Resentment Prayer. I did. I set some boundaries and we were able to talk more without arguing. She wasn't eating and was having trouble walking. I was concerned that she was not getting any help from her doctor or hospice, or anyone. She and my dad were lying to them saying they were doing OK.

I called everyone on the phone list but no one was home. I asked God to help me talk to someone who was familiar with my family situation that might be able to help. As I was ready to get some sleep, having failed to reach anyone, the phone rang. It was my cousin Barry who lived in Vegas. His wife had a brain tumor and was dying. We talked for about ten minutes and then he asked if I was attending any kind of support group. Barry and I once shared a bridal suite at his brother's wedding because I was drunk and he had done too many Quaaludes. I was not ready to tell him I was in recovery. He pressed me as to what kind of meetings I was attending and finally I revealed I was attending recovery meetings. He then revealed he had been in recovery for ten years! The perfect person to talk to. Thanks, HP.

My mom passed away during that call. The funeral was a few days later and my sponsor was there with me. We sat down under the tent and she asked me why I picked that spot? It was under a tree and to the left. I really didn't know why. Turns out her son, a member of the fellowship for about a year, had committed suicide and was buried right next to the spot I picked.

In my recovery, I finished an Associates, Bachelors, and Master's degree. I've hiked the Grand Canyon, been on a cruise, and went skydiving...nine times because I am still an addict. I learned how to be a mother, daughter, and friend.

I have also been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. I have doctors in charge of this part of my recovery. I tell my sponsor and my close friends what's going on with me, honestly. I have good relationships with my daughters and my oldest has fourteen years clean. I have the best friends in the whole world.

Since I was adopted at birth, I always wondered if I had any other family. My family has grown in the last year and a half, as I submitted a DNA test and found that this once only child has six siblings! Two of my sisters live less than two miles from me and one lives off the same street as me. I had a brother who lived across the street less than five blocks away. My sister Mary and I are so much alike it's weird. She is not in recovery but I'm going to save her a seat.

I recently retired and have a full life with service work in CMA. My life has not been perfect but it has been way better. I still attend about six meetings a week. I started going to CMA about six years ago. It's great to have a place to tell my whole story and talk about some of the things that only tweakers can relate to. I have reworked the Steps and feel so much more relief than ever before in my recovery.

The recovery of others is my greatest inspiration. Last week I celebrated 32 years of clean and sober recovery in a row, including weekends and holidays. I hope this will inspire others to keep on keeping on. Don't quit until the miracle happens! I learn something new at almost every meeting. The other day someone said they were relapsing until it was fun again. I suggested staying clean until it's fun. It will be fun. It will be challenging. It will be worth it.

A JAIL STORY

Generally, I'm an introvert and I keep to myself. Discovering alcohol and other drugs in my teens allowed me the courage to let loose. I always managed to put those other substances down. It wasn't until I met Tina and G on South Beach during the era of Liquid Nightclub, Crobar, Level, and Salvation (I had a fake ID back then, of course) that things started to turn.

It all started in good fun and, as our literature says. What started out as occasional use soon became a daily problem. I also thought it was a great idea to sell meth and G. It was all a very glamorous lifestyle of having no lines at the clubs and hanging with drag queens. I always had G on me and could be found in a nasty G-hole on the street, in my apartment, the bathhouse, or just about anywhere. I was a mess!

I was working at a substance abuse treatment facility in their accounting department—ironic I know. My boss suspected that I was high and threatened to have me drug tested. Being the good manipulator that I was, I threatened to quit if the test came back negative. He didn't call my bluff.

Those years turned tragic real quick. I disconnected from most family and friends. Sometimes I made it to work every day and sometimes I made it once a week. I'd go to the doctor and make up some symptoms just to get a note because I knew their patience was running out. I told my family that I was working a lot, and I would tell my job that I took a second job at night working in the nightclubs, which was kinda true...drug dealing.

My first arrest was in 2004 and I went into drug court for a year. During that year I went to outpatient rehab, provided someone else's urine for the drug tests, and forged all of the AA/NA meeting sheets. On paper I was a model client of drug court and the judge set me up for graduation a year later. In reality I was spiraling out of control, alone, depressed, and asking God for it to please just stop—I couldn't take it anymore.

I guess the phrase "ask and you shall receive" kinda holds true because a week before drug court graduation I was arrested again, this time for trafficking crystal meth. This was the opportunity I needed to change my life. I saw my Mom on the other side of that glass in the visiting room and she was in tears. I knew then that I wasn't just hurting myself. I did the only thing I could think of—I asked for help.

Eventually, I was released to the custody of the same treatment center I once worked at. One of their comments was, "we've been waiting for you." I sat across from the intake therapist where I expressed my desire for a new way of life and she looked at me and said, "what you just experienced is surrender." I felt like a weight was lifted off my shoulders. I successfully completed the program and, at the advice of my therapist, spent the next year living in a three-quarter-way house.

In early sobriety I went to a ton of meetings, worked the Steps, had sponsees, did service, started attending college, and worked a full time job. I was very busy. It was important for me to show the court, and most important, myself, that I was in this one hundred percent.

After two years of sobriety I was sentenced to 364 days in the Dade County Jail followed by ten years of probation—no early termination—for my drug trafficking charge. When the sentence was read and I was remanded into custody, a wave of emotions hit me.

The hardest thing I have had to do in recovery is turn to my family and friends in open court and say goodbye for several months. I was flooded with sadness that I would be leaving my family and friends, and terrified of what awaited me in the coming months. I had been in jail before, for a night the first time, and for ten weeks the second. I was coming down off of crystal that second time. Nevertheless, I was terrified.

I was taken to the second floor transient holding cell. Inmates came and went, either bonded out or moved to a permanent cell, but I was still there days later. I remember an officer asking who had been sentenced and was willing to work. I raised my hand immediately and was taken to a new holding cell for inmates waiting for a job assignment.

Eventually, I ended up in the E.K.U. (East Kitchen Unit) as a trustee to work in the kitchen. I held multiple positions while I was incarcerated. My first job was the feed line. I think we got up at 4 a.m. to start serving breakfast. We came in for a few hours and then back out to serve dinner. Lunch was bologna sandwiches that were prepared with breakfast.

Working certainly made the time pass faster and helped keep me sane, but what truly kept me connected was my friends and family. My loving sponsor, Rodrigo C., visited weekly with friends, and my family came on the other visitation day. These visits were the highlight of my week; they gave me something to look forward to. I will forever be grateful for these selfless acts.

My time there was challenging. I was in a cell with 60-something other people, which meant 60-something other personalities. We ate when we were told and slept when we could. Sleeping was hard. I never thought, once I got off of crystal, that I would ever say that. If it wasn't an officer coming in to pick up the crew for the next shift, it was the nurse coming in with meds, or the next officer coming on duty counting everyone, or just rowdy inmates. It was always something. Fortunately, I had a Big Book that was sent to me by one of my fellows. It was sent from AA publishing because that was the only way the facility accepted it.

The Big Book was the closest thing I had to a real meeting. We didn't have AA or NA at the main jail, only church, which I occasionally attended—just about anything to get out of the cell for a bit. I'll admit I didn't read the Big Book often, but whenever I felt like I just couldn't get through another day I would open it and read for a bit. The story "Acceptance is the Answer"—that one was a regular. Nothing changed for me as far as prayers were concerned. It was the usual "God help keep me sober" and the Third Step prayer in the morning, and "God thanks for keeping me sober" at bedtime. Oh yes! "Help keep me sober" and "Thanks for keeping me sober" were certainly needed in jail.

Some might think that being in a cell with an officer 24/7 meant that there were no drugs, but I certainly found otherwise. There was heroin and pot. I remember taking a shower and a group of guys jumping in to smoke some pot because I guess the steam from the shower and whatever they were spraying would mask the odor. You would think that, as a gay male, I would have enjoyed a group of guys coming in the shower with me but I have never run so fast before in my life. I literally ran out of the shower in fear of getting caught. They don't ask questions in jail—if you are with them you are guilty, and I wasn't willing to give up the time off. I was earning five days off my sentence for every month I worked. I removed myself. I guess this was where "We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us" came into play.

That wasn't the only incident.

I was folding laundry in the cell—by this time I had been promoted to House Man, i.e. laundry boy. It paid more, a whopping \$10 a week I think, or maybe \$15. Like I said, I was folding laundry and when I looked up I noticed a guy masturbating in the shower staring at a female officer. As soon as he noticed me, he tried calling me into the shower. I think he was a seasoned prisoner because he was obviously straight and obviously didn't care that I was a man. Had I obliged, this would have been another incident where my time off could have been revoked. Don't get me wrong—the thought and fantasy of jailhouse sex in the shower was really tempting, but I wasn't willing to lose my gain time.

It certainly was rough in there. I had to spend Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years, and my birthday in jail. I remember getting a birthday present from one of the other inmates, his name was Todd. We knew each other from the street. It was a box of Honey Buns wrapped in newspaper. What can I say? We made the best out of it.

As my time in there got shorter and shorter, I began to get anxious but I knew it was going to be alright. You see, I was fortunate. My Higher Power put certain people in my life that would help me get through it all. My boss Maria, knew my whole story and when she saw me go to jail she said she would hold my job for me until I got out. I also had my family and friends waiting for me. I knew I just had to push through and get to the other side.

That is exactly what I did. After a little over seven months I was released with credit for the time I had originally served

plus a reduction of about 35 days for the time I had worked. I know now, as I knew back then, that I never would have made it through those months had I not had previously worked the Steps and laid down a solid foundation. I don't think I ever would have made it without my sponsor and all the friends he brought to visit. Nor would I have made it through without the prayers of my fellows and the letters I received. For that I am eternally grateful. The Big Book and my Higher Power were also huge players in helping me get through. It is true what they say, sometimes the only thing between you and that next drink or drug or whatever, is your Higher Power.

Since that stint in jail, my life has continued to evolve as I've stayed sober. A couple of years after my release, when I was graduating from college and trying to get into a university, I had to take my case back to court to terminate my probation because the university didn't want someone on probation for drug charges. Of course the prosecution objected because they said I got a really good deal and that included no early termination of probation. However, the judge said, and I paraphrase, this was the perfect opportunity for the courts to intervene and remove a roadblock that could potentially lead someone back to a life of crime. He ordered my probation be terminated. Wow! Proof that when you continue to do the next right thing, it usually works out.

Life, sober life, is not all peaches and cream all the time. It has its ups and downs. I've attended a ton of meetings and there have been times when I was lucky to make it to a meeting a week. I do not suggest this at all. What sobriety has certainly given me is awareness. I can tell when I am not acting or thinking right and when it is time to drag my butt to a meeting or call my sponsor.

Some of the ups in sobriety have been being in a relationship, traveling, starting new jobs, getting promoted, getting my master's degree, buying a new home, service to the fellowship that has shown me a new way of life, and welcoming my nephew to this world just before the start of a global pandemic.

Speaking of service (shameless plug here), it has been an important part of my recovery and has helped get me through many of the low points that I will mention next. I started at the coffee bar and baked brownies regularly—that actually helped get me out of my head and into conversations with people. From the coffee bar I went on to chair meetings, get involved in business meetings, and sponsor other addicts. I became the

GSR for my group, worked with the intergroup, was elected a delegate to the CMA General Service Conference, and, after that, to the CMA Board of Trustees. Each one of those commitments was important to my recovery, but the most important has been working with other addicts and taking them through the Steps. As they say, I can't keep it unless I give it away.

Some of the challenges in recovery have included being dumped from that relationship, living through a global pandemic, and dealing with the loss of my grandma—though I am grateful I was able to be there for her up until the very end. I've been dealing with deep depression as a result of some of those really low points in my life. That awareness I spoke about earlier also helped me know when it was time to ask for outside help from a professional.

The point is that ups and downs are going to happen all through life. The important thing is that I know deep down inside that I am a meth addict in recovery and that picking up is *never* the answer or solution to any of my problems today. As long as I remember that, I can get through anything sober.

A ROAD LESS TRAVELED

My descent into the black hole that is crystal meth is a sordid and sometimes shocking tale that has its beginnings in the most unlikely of places. I was born in 1973 and grew up on the prairies in Winnipeg, Manitoba. I'm the youngest of two. My parents are still together after fifty years of marriage and are still very much in love. My childhood was idyllic, and my parents have always been a constant source of love and support.

Things changed dramatically however when I started high school in 1987. Growing up gay in the '80s meant one of two things: you were either a drag queen like Boy George, or you were dying of AIDS. With a lack of role models to identify with and a growing sense of not belonging to my peer group, I started to retreat further into myself. The bullying at school began to escalate to the point that every day was like entering a war zone. My life was hell. I felt alone, unlovable and flawed. I internalized this violence and hatred, and so began my long journey of self-loathing and feeling like I was never right in my own skin.

When I came out after high school, my life slowly began to change for the better, and I started to finally make some friends. My entire family, including my 80-year-old grandmother, accepted this news without any judgment or hesitation. After completing my undergrad, I moved to Vancouver. Though I had previously experimented with drugs, this is when my use of substances started to increase significantly. My first roommate was the daughter of a very famous British pop star, and access to drugs and parties became as easy as ordering a pizza. I felt popular, accepted, and loved, the complete antithesis of

my life in high school. My first problematic episode with drugs was in 2002 with cocaine. For several months, my then-partner and I used almost every day, until the relationship inevitably imploded. I was 29, had no direction in life, and realized that I needed to make some serious changes.

I started volunteering on a crisis line at the local LGBT community center, and I quickly discovered that I had a knack for helping people and connecting with those that were disenfranchised. I knew what it felt like to not belong. I decided to return to university and completed my graduate degree in counseling psychology. I was then hired as an addiction counselor and tasked to develop and implement a gay men's outpatient treatment program for crystal meth users. I had never touched crystal, and for the next three years I witnessed firsthand the savagery with which the drug affected the lives of my patients. Time and time again, I heard the same story of someone innocuously using crystal once and in a short amount of time their lives had spun completely out of control. The rates of new HIV infection were alarmingly high amongst my patients: up to 80% of clients at one point. This was really a crisis that was gutting the community, leaving nothing but carnage and destruction in its path.

Within three years the program had become a vital resource in gay men's health, and it garnered much attention and praise from the medical community. For once in my life I felt that I was finally good at something, that I was making a difference. I was promoted to a supervisory position, and the workload and stress increased tenfold. I tried to keep my head above water in the face of learning a new position, a marriage falling apart, the suicide of a colleague, and being on the brink of declaring bankruptcy.

Following the suicide of my colleague and friend, I remember coming home to a new partner, who I knew had done crystal, and literally saying, "Fuck it!" I called my dealer and asked for meth. I was off to the races. I used for two months. Following the inevitable demise of that new relationship, I vowed to never use it again. I remained abstinent for a year and a half.

Similar life stressors began to overwhelm me once again. I decided to pick up meth to escape and avoid the stress instead of addressing it. Within a week, I was using daily. I was smoking at least a gram every two to three days. This pattern continued for three years while I tried to maintain my job, another

relationship, and the appearance that my life was fabulous. The outside presented a shiny and sleek shell, but on the inside I was dying and falling apart. It wasn't long before the cracks started to show. Upon my second relationship ending at the hands of meth, I did my first stint at rehab.

My parents paid \$20,000 for one month of treatment at a top-of-the-line facility. Without an aftercare program, after discharge I was back to using on an almost daily basis for another year. I started attending some CMA meetings. I remember being highly judgmental of those in attendance. Only an addict can look down at another addict while standing in the gutter, I suppose. My ego was disproportionately out of sync with the reality of my growing addiction.

Some time later, I met my next partner. The red flags were glaring, as we met while having sex and using crystal. The two became instantly that much more addictive and I started to descend into the darkest chapter of this story. A few months into this new relationship, my partner asked if I'd be willing to try slamming meth. Foolishly I said yes. Once I had my first hit I knew that I was in trouble. It took it to a whole other level, and within a few days we were using intravenously on a daily basis. My use escalated to a gram per day. We tried to get sober a few times, attending a few CMA meetings here and there. It was at one of these meetings that I met a man who had six years of sobriety from meth. He would help me during some of the darkest hours that were on the horizon.

At first I was asked to go on medical leave from work for depression and anxiety, but these were clearly symptomatic of my raging meth addiction. Within a few months I qualified for long-term disability, and I started receiving almost my entire salary on a monthly basis. Without the commitment of work, my addiction spiraled down even further. The relationship with my partner turned violent and dark. Eventually he was escorted out by police, and a restraining order was issued. This was the third relationship that failed because of meth. I was broken in more ways than I ever thought possible.

Following the breakup, I was able to remain abstinent for about six weeks with the help of the man I had met in CMA. He became my first CMA sponsor. However, at Day 45 the cravings hit, and they hit hard. I was able to keep them at bay for a while because I didn't know how to inject. Initially I was terrified of injecting, but eventually the devil and the cravings won and I

learned how. What resulted was a dive into darkness, isolation, and a spiritual death that I had never experienced or imagined. I was drowning, and no one was coming to save me. I remember crying as I injected myself on Christmas Day, 2016. You know you have a problem with drugs when the only invite you receive to Christmas dinner is from your drug dealer.

After several years in CMA with different sponsors, I started working with a woman who had eight years of recovery. She checked on me regularly, made me feel I was not alone in the depths of my addiction, and made it clear the only option left was to be honest with my employer and to ask for help. Six weeks later they paid for me to go to rehab. This was an incredibly humbling experience, as my job consisted of developing and launching such treatment programs. I approached my treatment with the focus on being a patient—my “expertise” thus far had done little to help me stay sober.

While in treatment I was reminded of the importance of making friends. Some of the friends I made I hold dear to this day. One was Jordan, the epitome of the straight men who had tortured me in high school for being gay. This big, burly, muscular, tattooed ex-gangster, who had been released from prison into treatment, was loud-mouthed, opinionated, and rubbed me in all the wrong ways. That said, he was intent on befriending me, and after a long conversation about his disdain for homophobes, we became as close as brothers. Jordan helped me to let go of the hurt I felt, and he played a crucial role in the story of my recovery.

I saw Jordan frequently after treatment and settled into a routine of attending multiple meetings a day. One night I was asked to share at a meeting. Jordan and his fiancée, Maggie, were in the audience. I spoke at great length about my experience in rehab and especially about the friendships I’d made. I remember Jordan smiling broadly and crying. When I dropped him off at home, we hugged, exchanged our usual “I love you,” and made plans to meet later that week. The next few days were stressful, so I spent Friday in bed. I listened to a message Jordan left when he called around dinner time, but I put off returning it.

The next morning I went to a meeting and on the way home my phone rang. It was Jordan’s number. I picked up and jokingly mocked that he had slept in so late. Instead of Jordan’s cackle on the other end of the phone, I could only hear wailing and muttered words. I was able to decipher that it was Maggie, Jordan’s fiancée, at the other end of the line. The words that

followed next are ones that will be forever burned into my mind, “Jordan’s dead. He overdosed last night.” Everything went blurry from that moment on. I remember dropping to my knees on the sidewalk, gutted. I don’t remember the rest of my conversation with Maggie. I spent the next week in a daze. I kept replaying Jordan’s message in my mind from the night before his death, wondering if I’d called him back if that would have made a difference. I’ll never know what he wanted to talk to me about that night, but it is something that haunts me every day.

Two weeks after Jordan’s overdose, I relapsed. I regretted it immediately. This was no longer the life I wanted, and it was an affront to the passing of my friend. I went back to the rooms immediately and announced that I was coming back for the next thirty days, which was humbling as I was attending two to three meetings per day. I did it because it helped keep my ego in check. It kept me accountable and focused on making recovery the number one priority in my life. My ego had been killing me for years.

What helped me the most during this period was a psychologist who explained the recovery my brain was undergoing from crystal meth. Between days 45 and 120, my dopamine levels were experiencing major ups and downs, and this process led to increased depression, anxiety, and feelings of hopelessness. This contextualized my recovery process and gave me hope. Historically I’d always relapsed during this period, feeling like the obsession to use was never going to lift and the depression and feelings of hopelessness would never cease to dominate my life.

I woke up around day 120, and like some miracle, the obsession had lifted. I was no longer plagued by endless thoughts of using. I still had cravings, but they paled in comparison to what I had gone through between days 45 and 120. When the obsession lifted, I began to experience a new lease on life.

I was fortunate enough to still be off from work and able to further strengthen my foundation in recovery. I continued to attend meetings at least two to three times per day, started doing Step work, got a new home group, and started being of service. This combination really helped me stay on track and in the middle of the program.

I returned to work in November 2017, almost two years from the time I had gone off on my original medical leave. It’s been a little

over one year since that fateful Christmas, and I cannot believe how far I've come. If someone had told me a year ago that my life would consist of such happiness and optimism, I'd have thought they were on better drugs than me. My life isn't perfect, far from it, but this last year has enabled me to relearn the tools I needed to cope with stressors without picking up a drug. I can face my life instead of escaping it.

If I had to summarize my life thus far, I would turn to one of my favorite songs. "So I took the road less traveled by, and I barely made it out alive. Through the darkness somehow I survived. Tough love, I knew this from the start. Deep down in the depths, of my rebel heart."

I've spent most of my life feeling awkward and out of step with the mainstream—like I was never good enough, smart enough, or attractive enough. I've always viewed myself from the perspective of my deficits. In sobriety, thanks to working this program, I am learning to nurture my assets and be good with myself. For the first time, I feel I deserve to be happy. In some strange way I feel all the pain was worth it. Not running from the past or avoiding the future, I can enjoy the life that is in front of me. Just for today.

A BLESSING IN DISGUISE

I am in no way, shape or form considered to be a "perfect person." I've made countless mistakes and destructive decisions in my life that have brought me to where I am today in my sobriety. My name is Jessica, and this is my story.

Growing up, I suffered many hardships. My biological mom left when I was around 4, and my father married my stepmom, who in turn was an addict. Before I was old enough to understand the meaning of drugs, I experienced the signs and symptoms of a user, causing me to be deprived of a genuine mother figure. There was constant arguing. The kids were pressured to lie. We would discover paraphernalia around the house. Fabrications were built against my father portraying him as a monster. All this caused me to learn about drugs and the effects they have while I was young. At that time there were many different scenarios where my stepmom chose substances over her children. I didn't understand why. Child Protective Services (CPS) removed my little brother and sister and myself from our home when I was 15 years old and placed us under the care and supervision of my grandparents.

While there, I began to experiment for the first time with drugs such as LSD, cocaine, and ecstasy, without any knowledge. Within a year I became pregnant and moved back home with my parents, dismissing the idea of drugs. While living at home, I convinced my father to let the baby's father move in with us since we were still in a relationship. My baby's father showed signs of using months later. That's when I learned of his addiction to meth-amphetamines, the same drug that had overpowered my stepmom. Once I became aware, I tried to "fix" it and

help, but he had no desire to quit. I was left to go through the pregnancy alone, and his using affected me. I was continuously disappointed and neglected.

Finally, I got fed up and confronted him with two options—our family or drugs. He chose drugs. I was shocked and told him to leave once I recovered. I couldn't understand why some people held drugs above their family. Having experienced the same confrontation with my stepmom, it baffled me. I was naïve and in love, so I still tried to fight the battle against drugs and not lose the person I loved to it. I didn't realize that I didn't even have a chance. In 2007 I had my son, instantly falling in love with the little boy I held in my arms. We would visit his father, despite his drug addiction, not wanting to deprive them of a relationship. I still desired to have my dream of a family, so I continued to try with him. I never understood why people would act the way they do and choose drugs above all things, especially family. However, I became curious. I used methamphetamine for the first time with my boyfriend.

After that, life started to get crazy. My stepmom passed away. I experienced domestic violence for the first time, and it only got worse as time progressed. I was raped by one of my boyfriend's roommates, which had a powerful effect on me. I started to act irrationally, and my behavior changed drastically. I numbed myself with large amounts of drugs. My life became hopeless.

My addiction progressed. I lived that way for a few years, until I managed to pull myself together and move out of state. I remember thinking I didn't want to repeat the actions of others, and that my son deserved better. After I found out I was again pregnant, I returned home to Arizona and God blessed me with my second son. I met someone and got married. I had a job and my own apartment, and a somewhat normal life. I stayed sober for three years. Without taking the time to get to know my husband, I rushed into the marriage. He was a great guy, he just turned out to be an alcoholic. Another relationship was lost to the disease—and I had a new gateway drug after we separated.

I started drinking heavily. One incident landed me in the hospital from too much alcohol consumption, and I almost died. Luckily, the doctors were able to successfully resuscitate me. After that, I worked to get my life back on track and my priorities straight. That all went downhill when one of my friends from high school reentered my life and I let her stay at my apartment. It turned out she was addicted to methamphetamines and heroin.

I fought temptation and tried to kick her out, but I relapsed and lost myself and everything all over again. I made poor choices and lost my kids to CPS. Losing my kids affected me more than anything else in my life. I had become that person who chose drugs over family. The reality of it drove me to hide behind a mask of self-pity and a sea of drugs to numb the pain. When the opportunity arose to fight to get my children back, I was beyond lost, drowning in my own sorrows. All I wanted was to feel numb, needing to forget the impact of failure. I began a mission to destroy myself—I felt I didn't deserve happiness. Along with my addiction to meth I became addicted to heroin, too. The obsession I had for heroin grew quickly. It was the perfect antidote for my pain, and I clung to it like a lifeline.

Instead of living at home I chose to live on the streets. I associated myself with ruthless individuals, put myself in dangerous situations, and caught my first felony charges. I didn't care. Half the time my family didn't know if I was alive or dead.

After some time of battling with my addiction, I found myself in another relationship. In the beginning I felt a sense of security, and I trusted him. Looking back I realize that was an illusion. He had a "Jekyll and Hyde" persona. When I found out I was pregnant, I experienced domestic violence unlike anything from my past. I constantly had black eyes. There was an incident where he assaulted me with a knife and hammer, and another where I wasn't allowed to seek medical attention after he split my head open and you could see part of my skull. I had guns pointed at me and my life threatened multiple times, and much more. I was truly scared for the lives of my unborn daughter and myself.

This relationship continued even after I had my daughter, my love. I gave birth to her under the influence. I realized I was incapable of caring for her. I signed guardianship to a family member before CPS could take her.

On March 18, 2014, my boyfriend lost his life in a police shooting. I was arrested and charged with several felonies, including felony first-degree murder. Even though I didn't take his life, I was charged with murder, because I was viewed as an accomplice to the crime that was committed before he died. I was incarcerated for about three years in county before I pled guilty to the lesser offenses and was sentenced to five years.

In the end, I view my incarceration as a blessing, because my life has changed exponentially. I've been sober since the day of the

accident, and I still fight temptations when they arise. But a lot of the success of my sobriety stems from the support groups I've attended, CMA being one of them.

I've learned that drug addiction is not prejudiced and can affect anyone. Sobriety is a learning process that takes one day at a time. Honesty is the best policy, no matter how difficult. CMA taught me that having a sponsor is one of the most important aspects of sobriety—not only can you learn from them, but they can learn from you, too. Working the Twelve Steps helped me grow and gave me insight into who I truly am—the good and the bad. I was shown that you can give back and be of service to others—facilitating meetings and being a speaker. I learned that CMA is not built on judgment—it's made of understanding, fellowship, love, and hope.

I've learned a great amount from people on all levels of sobriety, whether they were one day sober or had ten years. It takes a wide span of knowledge and experience to help others. Not only do people from the fellowship become friends, some eventually become family. I am grateful for CMA and its fellowship. I don't know if I would have survived the toughest time of my life if I'd been deprived of it.

It's been an incredible journey. God has given me a second chance at life. He's shown me what I've neglected and taken for granted, and has given me the opportunity to make right the wrongs. When it comes down to it, I must remember to never give up, to ask if I need help, and to always remind myself that there is support from all different kinds of places.

Since my release from prison, I've been living in North Phoenix with my family. I work three jobs, two of them in construction. One of my jobs is as a plumber's apprentice, and I also work for a private investigator doing clerical work to those who come into the legal system. The transition from prison to home didn't have that much of an impact on me, and I continue to stay sober.

I've found that life around me was a little different, but one thing that has never changed is how passionate I am to embrace a healthier and more productive lifestyle. Although I mostly keep to myself, I surround myself with my family. I get to see my daughter as much as I want, and I am currently working on reestablishing a relationship with my other two children. Basically, I do my best to live as stress-free as possible and just take it one day at a time.

ON SECOND THOUGHT...

After my ex-boyfriend and I broke up at the end of 2010, I declared the following year to be a year of partying and celebration of being single and free. So I decided to check out a few circuit parties. My ex-boyfriend and I had traveled around the country and attended circuit parties together; now it was time to experience it on my own.

I knew that at some point I would have to give up drugs altogether. I knew this because I had been using drugs for about ten years and my life had gradually gotten worse. I was stuck in the cycle of using, craving, swearing that I would never do it again, and then restarting the cycle every two weeks.

I grew up in Malaysia in a family of alcoholics. My uncles, my aunts, and my grandfather all drank to oblivion every night. My grandmother did not drink. She and I were close.

Among the many scars of an alcoholic family, the memory that stands out the most is one of my uncles who drank so much that he had a stroke which paralyzed him from the waist down and erased most of his memory. His family had to care for him until he passed away years later. His love for alcohol was greater than his love for his family.

I didn't drink because I didn't like the taste of alcohol and I didn't want to turn out like my aunts and uncles. Casual drug use, however, was a different story. When I moved to New York City in 1999, I met a couple in an AOL chat room who I became intimate with. They would invite me over on the weekends. One of them was a drug dealer, and they introduced me to ecstasy, special

K and hallucinogens but never meth. They knew how addictive it was. They showed me love and kindness, comfort and sexual exploration. This was the entryway into a deeper longing for intimacy and connection.

While in San Francisco in 2001 for a conference, I met someone in an AOL chat room who asked if I partied and if I would like to try some crystal meth. I knew what meth was but had no idea how addictive the drug was. Eventually, I caved in and spent the next four days up. I never saw the world the same way from that point on. Crystal took away my anxiety, my fears, and my inhibitions.

When I returned to New York from San Francisco I met someone at a bar who I started dating and who was also into the party scene. This new relationship escalated my drug use. We moved in together into a tiny studio apartment on the Upper West Side weeks after meeting. It was only a matter of time before I lost my job when the Internet bubble of 2001 popped. This allowed me to spend more time at home using and partying with him. Sadly, I found out that the person I was living with was still with his partner. He was using me for drugs, sex, and a place to stay. Such deception! We were through. I asked him to move out shortly thereafter. He harassed me constantly, sometimes calling me twenty times a day.

It was at this time I decided to come out to my Mom who still lived in Malaysia. I told her that I was still her son and I loved her. We cried. She knew but still was sad. It was toward the end of the call that she said there were a lot of sexual diseases out there and she hoped I was taking care of myself. I told her I was, and we hung up. The following day, I developed 103-degree fever that I couldn't get rid of for three weeks. Since I was sleeping twenty hours a day, my doctor asked me to come in for some tests. A week later, the doctor told me I had HIV. It was a devastating blow. The doctor advised me to start medication immediately. I had 193 T cells and an 8 million viral load. I was very sick with fatigue, night sweats, weight loss, thrush, and discomfort. I had sero-converted. How did I get here? Death was not far away.

At this point I contemplated suicide, and how to do it. I was at home and recovering one day when I saw a bright light. It spoke to me. It was calm and soothing. It said you have a couple of choices: you can either continue down this road to more pain and death or you can choose a different life. The choice is yours to make. Some would call this a white light moment. This was about having compassion toward myself and a start toward a Buddhist

belief and spirituality. I hadn't connected the dots yet: sobriety and spirituality.

Two weeks later was September 11, 2001. I lived twenty blocks from the World Trade Center Towers. I was numb, unable to feel, and still recovering from the sero-conversion. I used crystal meth occasionally to help me not feel anything for the next four years. I became completely dependent on the drug. I thought about going to CMA but wasn't ready to give it up.

I used crystal meth to stay up on nights and weekends playing World of Warcraft with friends until I discovered the needle. When I did, it became sexual. I lost two jobs and many potential relationships. Friends started worrying. They tried to help me but didn't know how.

I was not only desperate, I was stuck in a repetitive cycle of using and despair. The drug was no longer a fun choice. It created more chaos and drama than I could handle.

I always had big dreams which included traveling around the world, but crystal meth bound and suffocated me within the confinement of my apartment. I stayed up for nights and days, and suffered from paranoia, seeing shadow people, bloodshot eyes, and weight loss. I realized that I needed to find a way to change all this in order to live a happy, healthy life. I craved intimacy and connection. Crystal meth may have created a temporary relief when high but when I stopped using, the depression, loneliness, and hopelessness hit me and took my self-esteem and self-worth along with it. This had to stop.

I asked my friend Stephen to take me to a meeting. It was on a cold Tuesday night, and the meeting room was packed with other like-minded addicts! Being at that kind of meeting for the first time was very scary and intimidating even though my dear friend was there for reinforcement and support. Throughout the meeting a lot of people shared about their experiences, concerns, and problems. Some stories were very personal and heartfelt. I heard my own story in someone else's share. Since I had a lot of shame about my addiction, I didn't think sharing my experience with a bunch of strangers was going to help solve my problems. But I soon realized that I didn't have to take my problems and secrets to the grave. While I was very proud of myself that I actually went to a meeting, throughout the week I experienced a lot of internal conflict whether this was the right move. I wasn't convinced that I was an addict at all. I thought an

addict is someone who was homeless and jobless and required public assistance. On second thought...I was almost homeless, and I was jobless, and would soon require public assistance. I dragged my heels for another week before I decided to go to another meeting.

I only had two days of continuous sobriety before I went to that Tuesday meeting, but I went anyway. This time I went alone. It was very scary to be there by myself and I felt extremely uncomfortable. I did not want to be noticed or recognized. I made sure no one knew who I was. I didn't raise my hand when asked if there was anyone new to the meeting nor did I introduce myself to anyone.

When I looked around the room, I noticed I was the only Asian guy. I felt out of place and convinced myself I didn't belong. I didn't understand some of the Twelve Step terminology that people were saying such as "sponsorship," "fellowship" or "Step work." I kept myself calm by sitting still on the corner of the chair and breathing slowly. I didn't want to draw any attention to myself. I made it through my second meeting and rushed out of the room as soon as I could. The third time I went, the person sitting next to me turned my way and introduced himself. He became my first sponsor.

In my first 30 days, I became friends with a handful of people. I kept a lot of things to myself as I was afraid to share at meetings, thinking that other people might judge me sharing my experiences. I had a false sense of pride and ego that prevented me from reaching out and asking for help. In my mind I was better than they were: I hadn't hit rock bottom. I didn't get arrested and I didn't go to jail. I learned later on that sharing was the only way for other people to get to know me.

The first 90 days of sobriety proved to be the most crucial period for me. Crystal meth is a very potent drug. When I decided to remove it from my life, I realized I needed to replace the void it left with something even more powerful: Spirituality. I decided to reintroduce meditation and Buddhism back into my life. That white light moment came back to me.

As I started to meditate again, everything that I had previously learned about Buddhism came back to me quickly. All the wisdom I had learned—the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the Twelve Dependent Arising, and Emptiness—started to become clear to me again as the fog of craving and using lifted.

Buddhism became a very handy tool throughout my path toward sobriety.

I kept myself busy. I restructured my schedule to include more time for rest, Twelve Step meetings and the gym. I found that having a very regimented schedule was exactly what I needed. By introducing some structure into my life, it helped me focus on the things that mattered and kept my life simple.

I met with my sponsor weekly and he taught me about the principles of the Twelve Step program. He taught me how the program worked and how to work the program, and he guided me through reading the Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book. He guided me through Step work in the same fashion that his sponsor had done it with him. We spoke on the phone daily. My erratic thinking began to settle a bit with the help of my sponsor's wisdom and guidance, and I was soon able to tackle some major decisions in my life. One of those decisions was not to date as it would distract me from my path of self-discovery. I also decided to keep my life as simple as possible, avoiding distractions and focusing only on sobriety and recovery.

Four months into my recovery, my sponsor and I parted ways due to a disagreement on whether I should also go to AA meetings. The reason I did not want to go to AA was because I didn't identify as an alcoholic. Drinking wasn't my problem. I will always be grateful to him for helping me stay clean and sober during this time. My emotions had been raw and my thoughts were unfiltered and undisciplined, but he began to help me change for the better.

I have learned that my experience and thinking isn't very different from other fellows. I now consider myself an addict. My ethnicity has nothing to do with my recovery. The only requirement to be in a Twelve Step program is a desire to stop using drugs and all other mind-altering substances. For me, the willingness to stay clean and sober is also an important attribute.

After several years of sobriety, I continue to take an active role within the program and fellowship. I chair meetings within NYCMA as well as taking on other service positions. I have held committee positions over the past five years on NYCMA's Share-A-Day, an annual event where we bring workshops and out-of-town speakers to the New York City fellowship. I represent NYCMA as its Public Information Chair. I also sponsor fellow addicts and I reach out to newcomers in the hope I can help them stay clean and sober.

THE KILLER IS IN THE HOUSE

I'm a crystal meth addict and I'm SOBER AF! I'm also TRANS AF! I'd also like to start by saying that I am a trauma human. I was sexually abused before I could walk. There was a lot of physical violence in our home which landed us in a domestic violence shelter by the time I was six. I was sexually trafficked by age 11. I came out as trans when I was a little human in an unsafe environment. I was homeless by the time I was 16 and living out of my car.

What I want to say about my trauma is my trauma doesn't make me an addict. What makes me an addict is that when I put a drug of any kind—alcohol, crystal meth, or whatever—it releases a negative ticker tape in my mind. Those voices were installed by all that trauma when I was a little human. My ticker tape tells me, "I have no friends, nobody loves me, I don't want to be here, I want to get the fuck out." Those are the messages that replay in a loop over and over. "If you went through what I went through, then you'd use the way I use."

Alcoholism is a disease of perception. It wasn't until I was in these rooms for a long time that I realized those messages were lies. I was lying to myself. People love me. I have lots of friends. I didn't know that until I started getting into the work of the program.

I was a poster child for not drinking or drugging for a long time because I gagged every time I smelled liquor. The smell of beer or hard liquor reminded me of the men who assaulted me when I was a little human and I wanted to throw up. Under the influence, people do monstrous things to others.

I didn't start using crystal meth until I met a boy that I fell in love with when I was 21 and in NYC, far away from my home environment. I found him at 4 a.m. at some club in the East Village. Let me tell you, the dream guy you meet at 4 a.m. in the morning will not be your dream guy when the dust settles. As soon as the drugs and alcohol were introduced to me, it was magic. It was the stop-gap to my suffering which I had been looking for. I thought if I did the crystal meth I could keep the boyfriend. I was already an introvert, disconnected from everybody. I knew I liked sex and wanted lots of it, so I could not stop using. I was powerless from the get-go. In no time I was shooting up daily.

My first CMA meeting was when I was 23. I went with that boyfriend, to a meeting at the LGBT Center. I listened to what you all had to say and about four or five shares in, I raised my hand and said, "Hi, I'm a crystal meth addict. This is my boyfriend. He needs a sponsor because he's ruining my high. When he gets high, he starts smoking pieces of the carpet and breadcrumbs from the kitchen floor. It's ruining my high." I was notorious for bringing my boyfriends to rehab. As soon as they would ruin my high, I'd take them to rehab and drop them off and continue using for 28 days of my own uninterrupted insanity.

That's when crystal meth was still kind of OK in my life. What I mean by OK is that I was using daily. I was shooting up while putting on a show at home, playing house. I would have martinis on the fire escape with the boyfriend. I'd have dinner, I would go to bed with him and wait until he was asleep, and then crawl into my bathroom, hit the pipe, and get high. Then I would crawl back into bed alongside him and pretend to be asleep.

I didn't come back to the fellowship for another ten years, until I was broken and powerless, scraping along the bottom. At the lowest point in my journey I gave up all my psych meds and the meds that were keeping me alive. I decided I was done. I gave my dog to a friend who was going to Illinois. I had a plan to kill myself. I didn't sign the renewal lease for my apartment. After a failed suicide attempt, I chose to hide my homelessness rather than ask anyone for help.

Somehow, I kept my dream job. I showed up to work every day which allowed me to believe my drug abuse was not a real problem yet. For a while I had the job, the apartment, the boyfriend, and the dog, but it was all empty. I wasn't able to access any of it because of the emptiness of my insides.

I finally came into recovery through rehab. I only went to rehab because I fell in love with another boy. I knew I couldn't stop using crystal meth, so I finally thought maybe I needed to go to that rehab I had sent all my boyfriends to. I took my ass to a rehab out in the Hamptons and told everybody I was going on vacation. I had my boyfriend keep all my credit cards and money because I knew I would check myself out and get drunk or high before I could reach the streets of NYC.

I stayed in that rehab for 29 days and I found out my boyfriend was using crystal meth. There was this one person who brought a meeting into rehab whose number I happened to get. I called her from the van on my way back to the city and said, "I'm afraid I'm going to be struck drunk." She said, "That's OK, find a meeting and call me in two hours." I found a meeting in the west village and circled around the outside until someone offered to get me a cup of coffee.

I eventually met my sponsor. She was the first person I identified with in CMA. She chased after me out of a meeting one day because I was crying about living out of a suitcase while sleeping on a couch in Brooklyn. The first words I heard out of her mouth were, "I love crystal meth." I said, "I do, too!" In that moment she said something about boys and girls not working together but I told her it was alright because I'm transgender. It still strikes me that when it comes to life or death we pause to check the assumed gender of the person we encounter. I legit could barely drag myself off the couch to get to a meeting, let alone figure out how to shave or dress myself.

Relapse is a big part of my story because I had no self-worth when I came in here. I had all that trauma and kept hearing those voices. After getting 87 days clean, holding on to my old ideas, I made a decision to call my mother. I picked up that same day. I went out seventeen times after that first 87 days back. I could not stop using, and I kept calling my sponsor and going to meetings. My sponsor would say, "Honey, you're gonna die," and I'd reply, "I don't care." She'd say, "OK, call me tomorrow." She was so loving!

It was really hard for me to do the work in this program because I thought the message of recovery was for all of you and not for me. Once I realized that my life depended on it, I started working the Steps. I began to notice that people actually did like me. When I stopped surrounding myself with sick people I stopped doing meth pretty quickly.

After my first Fourth and Fifth Steps I was able to clear a lifetime of shit out of the way so that I could start to have honest and meaningful connections with other human beings. Then I got to Steps Eight and Nine. My Ninth Step with my mom was the biggest one I had to do, and I knew it. She was my biggest trigger. She, my little brother and I all used to do crystal meth together in the trailer park back in Michigan.

As soon as I had done the Fourth and Fifth Step, I started a new relationship with my mom based on reality. It wasn't based on what happened when I was little anymore. It was a whole new relationship. I made direct amends to her and we had an amazing time together. She accepted my trans identity and things were great. I knew our last moment together would be the last time I was going to see her alive. She was diagnosed with late stage cancer not long after that and it strengthened my resolve to keep doing the program work that I needed to be doing until she passed away.

I flew out the day my mom died and was able to show up for the family. I'm not the kind of person who needs to see someone after they've passed—I'm not into seeing dead bodies. My brother asked, "Are you sure you don't want to see her?" So I went in there and held her hand and said the Third Step Prayer. Within an hour and a half of being at the funeral home, my baby brother had a crystal meth dealer at the house and it was within my arm's reach. My last reservation to use was that I was going to get high after my mom passed away. Somehow I'm still sober! I must have tapped into a power greater than myself. I had no desire to drink or drug or fuck up my life that day or since, and that's because of the program.

I heard somebody at a meeting say, "The killer is in the house!" I think about how much this disease in my head tries to trick me into going back out—back to believing those old ideas. It's like that horror movie where the young girl loses her virginity and you know the bad guy is coming after her. She runs up the stairs and you think, Why don't you just jump out the window? The killer is in the house! It's not the stuff on my outside that's going to take me out, it's what is going on in my head. It's my negative thinking that will always lead me the wrong damn way!

The way I get out of that thinking is by going to meetings, calling my sponsor, and working with newcomers. I got my first sponsee after a year and they talked a mile a minute. I had no idea what they were saying. I learned to love them and pick up

the phone when they called, so that maybe I would stay sober that day.

My sponsor suggested I go to Share-a-Day at CMA and meet my sponsee brother, who was doing service. I was so scared of CMA, because I had been there so many years before. He brought me around and introduced me to all of you. You all hugged me and welcomed me and I thought, These people have no boundaries! They're hugging and hugging, and I thought, I don't know you. Why are you hugging me? Truth is my inner dialogue was saying, Don't touch me!

The first time I shared at a CMA meeting when I came back I said, "All you people talk to each other but never talk to me." After that share you all came up to me and gave me your numbers. I had this Aha! moment and realized I was afraid of you all. Maybe if I was afraid then others could be afraid, too. So I started to introduce myself to the person on my left and my right at every meeting I went to. I would offer my phone number and allow them to talk about themselves—addicts do love to talk about themselves. This helped to get me out of my head after a meeting and be of service.

As I continue to grow, I realize I love everybody in this program but I don't necessarily like everyone. It's not called Well People Anonymous. That's OK, I can love you and not really like you. I'm still going to reach out the hand of the program, because if I don't do that, and practice love and service, then I'm not going to make it.

When I showed up for my mother's funeral, I knew how to practice love and service there, too. I set up the chairs, just like you showed me to do before a meeting. I discovered my family doesn't like me and that's ok. I still can practice love and service. I don't like most of my co-workers either, but today I can show up and say, "How can I help? What can I do to make things better?"

I started to love myself when I started doing esteemable acts. They were the things my sponsor suggested I do. She gave me the opportunity to finally have an intimate relationship with others, with myself, and with my HP.

I'm a happy customer of CMA. If you're still thinking the Steps won't work for you, you might be one of the few. The Steps are working all over the world, so if the Steps are working for

all those people, you might as well try it. What do you have to lose? What do you have to gain by doing these Steps like your life depends on it? It might save your life like it saved mine.

May the 11th Step be with you!

WHY DON'T YOU TRY LIVING?

Whenever I go to a First Step meeting, I often hear people share about their desperation and not wanting to die. I'm not unique or special, but I wanted to die. I swallowed, snorted, slammed, and simply consumed everything, hoping that it would kill me. I didn't have the courage to simply put a gun to my head; I just kept using as much as I could. I became more depressed because I continued to exist. I felt like a vampire that feared too much light. I couldn't die, yet I couldn't live either. When I accepted the fact that I was simply a sick alcoholic/crystal meth addict and that the Higher Power of my own understanding was keeping me alive for some reason, I realized I had to discover a way to live.

Shame, fear, and secrets were three components fueling my disease from day one. I realize that I have always been an addict with this illness. The biggest shame I ever felt was when I realized I was gay at 7 or 8 years old. I wasn't fluent in LGBTQ terminology, but I just knew I felt attracted to other girls in a way that "I shouldn't." I didn't know any gay people and, at that time in the early 1980s, ignorance and bigotry equated gay with AIDS.

One of the pastors at my childhood church was outed for his proclivities with another man, even though he was married with three children. I remember the hatred, judgment, and outright cruelty he encountered. I felt so sad for him, but I decided to keep my head down and my mouth shut, afraid I would be found out. Besides, I had been adopted from a developing nation by a Midwestern family. I didn't look like anyone else in my family or my town. With my black coarse curly hair and complexion, I felt I stood out like an alien. I also had issues with my weight,