



Michael T's Story

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By Michael T.

I grew up in Richmond, California—right along California's "drug corridor." Of course we didn't know that then. All we knew was there were a heck of a lot of drugs being consumed in our neighborhood, and plenty of alcohol being drunk everywhere you turned. I'm in the substance abuse counseling field now, and I look back to those days and wonder how anyone ever made it out of there alive. But here I am, the Air Force, prison, and near-death experiences ... no! actual death experiences later, and I'm alive and grateful. Let me tell you my story.

My Mom was great. My Dad knew what was going on, and something about his own life experience drove him to drink. It finally killed him. My siblings used. I drank, too—and experimented with drugs. I used marijuana at 12, alcohol at 14, then graduated to Red Devils—things that people don't even use any more. But I'm talking about the early Sixties.

I hated what I saw out our front door and down my street in Richmond. All the chaos, the violence, the wasted lives. I knew the drug-user's lifestyle would kill me, so I joined the Air Force as soon as I could. It was in the last year of Vietnam, and the War was trying to end. It was a relief when it was over, but it was also oddly a kind of let-down. I mean, I'd been trained for war, and all of a sudden the War was over and all these guys who had been using heroin overseas started

coming home. A lot of addicts came home from Vietnam. Everyone knows they weren't given a hero's welcome. Many were bitter and traumatized, disappointed, and just plain stunned by what had happened—by not being allowed to really try to win the war. It was a demoralized military, and all that unhappiness led many soldiers and airmen to try to escape into drugs and alcohol.

Someone eventually offered me heroin. For all the drugs I'd used in Richmond, I had managed to avoid heroin. In fact, I think I really got out of Richmond, in part, because I was trying to outrun heroin. I just had the feeling that if I used the ultimate drug, that I wasn't going to be able to stop. But by joining the military in the last days of Vietnam, I ran smack into heroin being used by peers I respected; guys like me—who thought they'd never end up using—guys who had the rug pulled out from under them and who needed nothing more than to escape the pain and humiliation of coming home from losing a war for the first time in American history. And I got sucked into all of that.

But I didn't use it much. Just enough so that I finally knew how it felt. I understood that if a man really needed to escape from reality, heroin was the way to go. Then my enlistment ended, and I was out of that depressing place, and away from all the influences that had been pulling me toward drugs.

I decided to go to the land of opportunity: Las Vegas! No, not to gamble, but to get a good job at the main airport. The best kept secret at the airport was the Sky Cap job, helping people to check their bags and getting great tips. I was making \$60,000 a year, had a wife and three kids, and life was great.

On the job at night being the supervisor, I kept seeing people toting cases around, week after week, who I started figuring out must be drug runners. Finally one of them started up a conversation with me and before I really had time to think about it, he was offering me a money-making opportunity. I should have been satisfied with what I had, but the lure of easy money got the best of me, and I started helping the pusher by pushing a little cocaine, myself. It didn't last long. I sold to an undercover police office three times and was arrested. Because I had been living a good life before getting busted, I had friends and people in my life who were willing to write letters to the court on my behalf. My minister, business people, people of high standing in the community who believed in me and couldn't believe that I would get involved in selling drugs. I couldn't believe it either. What was I thinking? I had thrown my good life away and put my wife and kids into a horrible position.

Anyway, the letters and personal references helped to convince the prosecutors to drop two of the charges, but the other one stuck. Rather than a sentence of 20 years, I received only five and was out in two and a half. And I was out of Nevada very quickly when I was released. My wife and I tried to start up the relationship again, but she was so disappointed and angry over what I had done, that she just couldn't forgive me. I could never achieve the same income I had before being arrested, and I couldn't get us back to my pre-prison lifestyle. Everything in our lives was a reminder of the huge mistake I had made. Finally we split up for good.

My father had already passed away from his drinking. My mother was having her own health problems, so I decided to go back to California and try to forget the way I had disappointed everyone—and especially myself—in Nevada. But back in California without a job, having spent several years learning to think like a criminal while in prison, I caught myself doing some of that “stinking thinking,” and before long I was back on the street again, selling cocaine. Soon after starting to do that, I was arrested again, on trial again, and back in prison—this time in California. It broke my mother's heart.

When I was released on Parole, my Parole Agent told me that dirty tests would land me right back in prison. He suggested that I become a BASN [Bay Area Service Network] client, and get substance abuse treatment somewhere in my county, Contra Costa. I agreed and was referred to the Discovery House in Martinez. It was a good program, but I was coasting through it, just going through the motions to satisfy my Parole Agent. I was hearing some good things, though. And I started trusting the counselors—especially Dennis Venegas ... a man I would get to know very well over the next ten years. Finally Discovery House discharged me as a treatment success, and I was back out on the street, looking for something to do.

The BASN Program in Contra Costa tried to keep the clients who had finished treatment in touch with each other. So they started a meeting—kind of an AA / NA meeting, and sort of a therapeutic session. BASN also helped me achieve housing. I attended the BASN meetings and made new friends who were trying to stay clean and sober, trying to put their lives back together after prison and treatment. I appreciated the opportunity to meet with people and see that others were doing well. I attended, but as I started to get more and more distance from the program, I also got more and more itchy for heroin and the instant, warm, comfortable escape it always provided me when things got tough. I started using

again. I was embarrassed to tell anyone that I had relapsed, and I stopped attending the BASN meetings. Soon I was right back to where I was before my Parole Agent hooked me up with BASN.

Then a very scary thing happened. I started mainlining heroin again ... but that wasn't the most scary thing. While I was totally wasted, one day, I was wandering along outside, under some trees, when I fell into a pile of dry pine branches. A spiny pine needle stuck into my arm, but I was so out of it that I didn't realize it. The next morning, my brother woke me up when he saw that my arm was swollen to twice its size. He drove me to the emergency room and they quickly realized that I had some kind of cellulites, and that I would lose my arm if they didn't operate right away. By the time they got in there, muscle in my bicep had already started to die, and they had to remove half of my right bicep muscle, from top to bottom. It was a freak thing, and it happened to me in the days when "flesh-eating bacteria" was all over the news, so it was all very frightening for me and my family.

After the initial operation, the hospital had to do a large skin graft. And that's when the worst happened: I suddenly died. Yes, I actually died right there on the operating table. It was completely unexpected. The doctors grabbed the paddles and shocked me over and over again, trying to revive me. As it was told to me later, they finally gave up, and were writing the time of death on the paper when I suddenly began to jerk and twitch. At first they thought it was some kind of contraction that happens in death, but then realized it was a seizure. They grabbed up the paddles again and zapped me some more until my heart started back up. So for the moment I was alive.

I was transferred to the ICU, and the medical staff were amazed that I was breathing, at all. But I had been dead long enough—no heart beat and not oxygen—that they didn't think I'd come out of it with much hope for a normal life. Then, lying quietly in the ICU bed, I went into cardiac arrest and died again! Out came the paddles, and they got my heart started again, but I didn't wake up. I went into a coma and was basically brain-dead for the next 17 days. The doctors were sure I wouldn't come out of it and would die without regaining consciousness. But somehow, by the Grace of God, I woke up. But I woke up not knowing who I was or where I was. I was conscious, but I wasn't "me" any more.

In order to keep me alive, knowing that my heart was likely to stop beating again, the medical team implanted a kind of pace-maker—a cardiac defibulator—next to

my heart to keep it beating and to keep the rhythm right. That was done over eight years ago with a replacement two years ago, and it is still working.

Incredibly, I got better. The doctors confided in me that I should never have recovered. I was dead not once but twice, in a coma, lost all memory, all of that, any yet I was back to life again, wheeled to the door, and released back out onto the street. No job, confused, and having no idea what had just happened to me or why.

I knew I needed to go back into treatment. So I contacted Dennis Venegas who was, by then, helping to coordinate the BASN Alumni Association. He helped to get me placed back into Discovery House. At that point, I wasn't on Parole any more, so I was in the program as a regular client. But because I was still a BASN alumni—and always will be—I was allowed to attend the BASN meetings. They were helpful, but my mind was still affected by the damage to my brain that had occurred as a result of the loss of oxygen and the coma. I don't want to make excuses, but I really was “messed up in the head.” I wasn't tracking very well. It was hard to concentrate. But I was glad to be alive and really wanted to stay off drugs.

Now you would THINK that I would have thanked God and changed my life. I was aware—and everyone told me—that God must have a plan for me, or else why would I have been allowed to come back from all of that? And yet, within a short time after getting out of Discovery House for the second time, I was using heroin again, and found myself broke and in need of money for drugs. Once again, I couldn't call Dennis or any of my BASN friends because I felt humiliated by how weak I was. I needed money and I needed drugs, and there were no job prospects on the horizon. So I got a bad check from somewhere, and—sure enough—I was caught at a bank trying to cash it. I was taken off to jail and soon I was back prison again!

At least while serving that sentence I had some opportunity to recuperate from the brain trauma. My strength came back while I was in prison, and my thinking problems started clearing up. In a way, I guess, that quiet stretch of time in CDC made it possible for me to regroup and get ready to start life over. I don't want to minimize the fact that I was back in prison, but in a life like mine, given the medical and mental issues, if I hadn't had that sentence right when I did, I don't think I would have lived long out there on the cruel streets of Richmond.

Of course, when I got out I was back on Parole. My mother was gravely ill and not expected to live. When I went to see her, she perked up again and told me that she was sure that God had a reason for saving me out of those two deaths and that coma. She begged me to go back into treatment at the Discovery House. She held my hand and wouldn't let go until I promised her I'd call my old sponsor and start attending meetings. I promised I'd do it.

Mom wanted to go home to die, she told me, so I helped my siblings to arrange for hospice at the house. My mother was discharged to home, where the doctors told us to expect that she would soon die. I couldn't bear to see her like that. I didn't want to watch her waste away and die before my eyes. So I didn't keep my promise right away. I started looking for that warm and peaceful escape where I wouldn't have to face what was going on. I started heading right back toward the life, and would have, too, except that my sister found me and said that our mother had slipped into unconsciousness and they had taken her back to the hospital. She was expected to die within the next few days. I knew how much my lifestyle and failures had hurt my mother. And I remembered my promise from the other day. So I went to the hospital one last time to say good-bye.

My mother was unconscious. She had not spoken in 24 hours. She didn't recognize anyone or acknowledge anyone's presence in any way. But when I came into the room and took her hand, Mom opened her eyes and looked at me. I saw that love—that longsuffering love that had forgiven me so many times. I remembered all the promises, and how she always welcomed me back home, no matter what I had done, where I had been, or how low I had sunk. I had shamed her by my actions, and yet she always loved me through it all. Now she lay dying. And all I could see in her eyes was the kind of unconditional love that only a mother can have for her children. And I realized what a blessing it had always been to have such a mother. She looked at me with a kind of belief in me, with no word, and I saw that she was communicating to me without talking. The promise I made. Yes! That was it. She was telling me that I had something to do for her before she dies: Go back into the treatment program, Son, she was telling me. Stay there. Learn. Change. She wanted me to be who I was always supposed to be ... to be the Michael she meant me to be, who she had sacrificed for and loved no matter what. "GO!" she told me with her eyes—as clear as any sentence I had ever heard. And I said, "Okay, Mama, I'm going. I'll keep the last promise I made to you." And, crying, I left the hospital room.

The next day, I showed up at Discovery House and, did the intake, signed the papers, and was assigned my new counselor. Sue was the toughest counselor in Discovery House. I told her my mother was very ill, and about the promise I made to her. I wanted to be allowed to go back home and return to the program after my mother passed, but Sue said, “Absolutely not! You made a promise to your mother, and you’re going to keep it. If you go back out there, you won’t be coming back. You and I BOTH know that, don’t we?” I had to agree. “What’s more important?” Sue asked, “Seeing your unconscious mother, one more time, watching her die when she’s no longer aware of her surroundings? Or keeping the last promise you will ever make to her?” There could only be one answer.

Two days later, my mother passed. Another resident accompanied me to the funeral. I was not allowed to stay at the wake. Not allowed to be alone. The counselors and residents back at Discovery House were like a hedge of care and concern around me. And Dennis and the BASN Alumni let me know that I will always have a family with them. I knew that I would keep my promise and that my life had changed.

After being a Discovery House client for the third and magic time, I made good on my commitment to stay in recovery. I attended the BASN Alumni meetings faithfully; went to the dinners, helped at the car washes. And I admitted when I was weak and asked my peers for help. In turn, I have helped others. I have a sponsor who has a sponsor, who has a sponsor. And I sponsor others. I regularly attend recovery conventions across the U.S. I stay in my recovery one day at a time, and I remember the lessons of the past and hope—for my self, for my family, and for my friends—for a better future.

A long time ago, the first time I went into Discovery House, Dennis Venegas told me that I might make a good counselor some day. A lot has happened since then, but I never forgot that. I received help from the State and was able to go back to school. It was a struggle considering the brain injury, and all, but eventually, after two years of general education classes, I was ready to attempt the addiction specialist course. I worked hard, got married again to a wonderful woman, started a new family, got a job, and soon after that I got my counseling certificate. I started speaking about recovery, and somehow my story came to the attention of the Director of Contra Costa’s AODS Division, Haven Fearn. When the Division had need of some new case managers, he asked my employer to lend my services to the County.

I'm doing just what I want to be doing. I know that I am helping others, now, the way that Dennis and Sue, my Parole Agents, and so many others have helped me. I know that I am keeping my promise to my mother and my family, and I renew that promise daily. I am happier than ever and my life is in peace and harmony.

BASN and the Alumni Association have played a huge role in my ability to climb back up out of the hole I had dug for myself. If they had not been there, I may not have made it. Discovery House and the other Contra Costa County treatment programs that I now work with are all that stand between many people and death on the street due to drugs and alcohol. They are so important and deserve the support of the community, the County and the State.

I give thanks every day for my recovery and for all the experiences I was able to get through and learn something from. It was impossible to imagine—when those things were happening—that I would one day be able to turn those bad experiences into a way to better understand and relate to other people in trouble. But I feel sure that is the “purpose” behind much of what has happened to me, much of what I did to myself. God uses our mistakes and our temporary shortcomings to build within us a person in His image. I strive to live up to that hope and to the promise of being a helper ... someone who helps others to keep their promises. And I salute all those who ask others to make those promises, too, not once but time and time again. Don't give up on your loved ones. It's never too late for them to have that prayed-for change of heart.