

Warminster man finds recovery after nearly a decade-long addiction to opioids

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Warminster native Brian Batchelor suffered from opioid addiction for nearly a decade. He shares how recovery happened for him.

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Brian Batchelor was bounding down the basketball court, dribbling to the foul line, on a cool, crisp fall afternoon.

“I’m a little rusty,” the 29-year-old said after launching a few balls that bounced off the rim. “It’ll come back.”

Basketball is a passion of the 6-foot 2-inch Warminster native, who recalls winter childhood days scraping ice and snow off the driveway to make room to play. Returning to the court brings back a joy the former William Tennent High School basketball standout never thought he’d recapture after years of opioid addiction.

One recent day, Brian verbally flipped back the pages of nearly a decade blurred with homelessness, scamming for cash and repeatedly stealing from the people he loved the most to feed his addiction to pain pills and then heroin. Two years after taking his first Oxycontin, the one-time basketball star with multiple college scholarship offers was on his way to becoming another fatality of the epidemic gripping the nation.

But he survived.

And he shares his story to remind people that — despite the rising death toll from opioid addiction — recovery can happen. How it happens is different for everyone, he now knows. It’s still happening for him.

Brian’s recipe for recovery had more to do with a convergence of personal choices, treatment, therapy, unwavering support from even the most unlikely people — and a stint in jail. That rattled him like so many other bad experiences hadn’t, including being revived from a near-death overdose by a cop on a train in Philadelphia, the homeless nights in Florida sleeping in lifeguard stands, or pleading with his family for money, food, a bed.

Behind bars, he had a glimpse of a future he didn't want. Around him were men in their 40s, 50s and 60s, who had served multiple jail sentences related to drug use. And they were the lucky ones, he said. They were alive.

His parents' call to the police landed him in jail for probation violations stemming from theft charges.

“He became a monster — someone we didn’t know anymore,” his father, Matt Batchelor, said. “I’ll never forget the look he gave me when I had him arrested. He hated me. But we feared for his life.”

Brian said it was one of the worst moments of his life, but one of the best things that could have happened to him. With time in jail to reflect on the destruction of his addiction, he decided to really give recovery a chance.

From that jail cell, Brian didn’t realize how far he fell until he tried to get up. The drugs had dulled his emotions, he said, distancing him from everything he loved — except basketball. In prison, he found his way back to the basketball court. And the guards, after seeing him play, gave him extra yard time.

"It wasn't a very big court, but it was enough," he said. "It felt good, and for that hour or so we played, I didn't feel like I was in jail. I could do something other than drugs. It was a healthy escape I needed."

Even with a plan to get clean, he slipped when he got out of jail. Then someone unexpectedly caught him.

“I’ll never forget her,” Brian said about the Bucks County parole officer who discovered him using drugs and gave him an ultimatum: Get help or go back to jail.

Learning of his unsuccessful stints in rehab, she pointed him toward medication-assisted treatment, known as MAT. For Brian, that involved daily doses of methadone paired with intensive therapy at Aldie Counseling in Doylestown Township.

While MAT is a medically recognized therapy, its use of opioid-based medications means some are skeptical of its use.

Brian was one of them.

He didn’t want to be dependent on another drug, even though the methadone he was prescribed prevented agonizing withdrawal symptoms and drastically reduced his drug cravings.

“It started to turn things around for me, and I started thinking differently,” he said. “I realized a lot of people take medicine to help them. Some people take medicine for blood pressure; this was no different.”

Next came group and individual therapy, steps in recovery that he had dismissed in the past. “At first, I wasn’t sold on the whole living clean idea, but I started paying attention and actually listening, for once in my life,” he recalled.

Experiencing clarity in recovery after nearly a decade on drugs left him feeling as if he were restarting his life from infancy, Brian said. Daily therapy with life skills counseling and family involvement helped him unlatch from the psychological addiction to illegal drugs and unhealthy lifestyle patterns. His parents helped him re-establish normal routines of life — such as mowing the lawn and doing other chores around the house — and even helped him stick to a sleeping schedule to prepare for the work world.

A therapist helped him identify realistic goals and ways to achieve them. Learning to confide in others to get support and to support others in group therapy were also huge steps, he said.

Trust and faith from his family strengthened his resolve even more, Brian said. His brother Matty asked Brian to be the godfather for his infant daughter, a gesture that filled Brian with joy and purpose.

“They trust me to watch that baby alone; you see, that is the kind of stuff I never thought in a million years would be part of my life,” he said.

But Brian's family and therapy could only take him so far in his recovery. The next step was up to him, and in some ways, the public.

Finding a job is one of the biggest challenges for people with an addiction and criminal history, he said. He needed someone to give him a chance. He blames a petty theft conviction for the months of rejections for jobs at big-box retailers and grocery stores.

He turned to Craigslist, looking for manual labor jobs. He thought he had a break when he landed a job installing drywall. Six months into the job, he confided in his boss about his drug history. “He fired me on the spot, saying I was a liability,” Brian said.

That was one of his most glaring reminders of the stigma that hinders recovery for so many people, Brian said.

Still, he didn't give up. He found a job installing wood floors and a boss who didn't hesitate to hire him or give him time in the mornings to continue his therapy and group meetings. This boss, he said, makes him feel supported — not shameful.

Nearly 30, and two-and-a-half years clean, Brian said he still has work to do on his recovery. Sitting beside his girlfriend, who's also in recovery, he expressed his gratitude for the milestones that guided his journey — the jail time, the parole officer, the treatment at Aldie, his current job and, especially, his parents, who never gave up hope that he'd recover — even when he lost hope himself.

“I still have a lot of work to do, but at least now there is a light, a big light, at the end of the tunnel,” he said.

The simple pleasures in life — having a job, getting a license, being an uncle — have helped keep Brian clean and have reignited his passion for basketball, which he called a “huge factor” in his recovery.

“Basketball brings back good memories and reminds me of all the joy I felt when I was younger; and I needed to start doing things again to bring back joy into my life,” he said.

Brian's comment on that crisp fall afternoon on the basketball court, that his skills would come back when he warmed up, proved correct. After a few minutes taking shots, he flicked his wrist toward the basket, watched the ball arc in the air and listened to the empowering sound of the ball dropping through the net with a swoosh.

A smile stretched across his face, and he was home on the court, finding the joy in the simple familiar sounds of his rebound to life.

Swoosh, swoosh. Swoosh.