

Our foundation is about early substance abuse awareness.
And the only way that really works, is well before anyone starts.

I want you to meet my brother, Michael...the sad thing is, this page is they only way that you'll ever be able to.

Who Was Michael?

I want you to know how awesome, and how smart he was.
He was a better person than me.

My brother and I went to private school. My brother coached hockey teams. He was an *incredible* hockey player. He was built like a tank, and he took really good care of himself. When I was down and out on his couch--he was building a yacht detailing business.

His tough love....emphasis on love, pushed me to get up and start my own business.
Everybody loved Michael.

But so did oxy...

...this drug doesn't segregate. It doesn't pick and choose.

It takes anybody.
Anybody who is engaged with it.

Who Is Oxy?

Oxy is more than a drug. It's a personality. It invades your life. Takes your stuff. Pushes you to the fringe of society. It's so easy to meet oxy and fall into its net. How? Let's say you broke your disc.

Your body is not going to heal yourself.

"Here," says your doc. "Take this pill. You'll start sleeping at night."

Yeah, you'll feel great.
For a while.

Eventually, you'll get addicted. It's what the pill does to you. I feel like there are a lot of people who have that gene. It never goes back to normal once you've taken just one too many pills. You never know how much you can you push--until you've pushed too far.

Like alcohol. Some people have drinks and they're fine. But once that switch is flipped, with alcohol and drugs, you have a *disease*. Something **new** about who you are, and the way that you work.

Something with a scary dark side.

Now you have to fear and respect your disease. Because it's never going away.

(And if it can...it'll kill you.)

But first, it's going to take everything it can.

Early on, people don't realize, it's going to go from \$300 a week, to \$300 a *day* in 60 days.

Then you get your first arrest.

Detox in jail.

Halfway house.

You're scared about getting your life together.

Finally move out, and now the real world comes pouring in.

You're stressed.

Emotionally, you're not ready to take care of yourself--let alone what it takes to get by.

"What do I know how to do?"

...Drugs. All you know are drugs. That's what it tells you.

Drugs provide you with comfort. Security.

Once you have the problem it's like a demon inside of you. It will always be there.

Tempting you. And you need support to overcome it. Everytime something goes wrong, it says in your ear:

Go out and get a bag.

Michael Was Special

Who was Michael? He's an angel who came down with a disease. But this didn't make him who he was. Everyone else, family, friends, coworkers, they speak the world of him.

He was super laid back; could walk into a funeral and make people smile. At his services there were over one-thousand families.

A lot of people didn't know he'd lived with addiction for at least seven years.

He played hockey. That was a big part of where the addiction came from. He took a pounding. He was a really good player and he had serious injuries. He started taking pills for the pain relief, not knowing what he was getting into.

Not realizing that drugs would kill him.

If the education really was there, and if my Mom was there, she would have been more observant and seen what was happening...not that it was my parents fault at all. They took incredible effort, and major sacrifices to help Michael.

...It just wasn't enough.

The College Pill Connection

He was in college between 2008 and 2012. Michael's roommate had crazy connections to get oxy pills. I told Michael, "Stay away from that! Don't mess around." He was always following my lead but when it came to oxy, he went his own way. After taking oxy's for one to two months--consistently--he developed his addiction.

Soon he owed his dealer-roommate three grand. Of course, he couldn't stop now. Being a good friend, he worked the payment out with him.

He'd forgive the debt. But there'd be no more credit.

"Going forward, you have to buy them," he said. That didn't put off Michael. By now he needed the pills to live. So his life began to revolve around those pills. Michael started working so he'd always have money to buy. Chronic use of oxycodone damages the nervous system--we know that in lab rats, it basically wrecks their brains. When Michael came back from college, he wasn't himself. He was dating a girl. He wasn't as goofy.

He'd gotten serious. Like an adult. An addicted one.

It wasn't a fluke--this is what the oxy does once it becomes a member of your family. You can smoke and put it down. But not oxy. We tackled it as a family. There were six of us, and we all had a role. A combination of soft love and hard love. My mom Facetimed my brother *every day* for seven years.

That's how invested she was.

Who is Using?

Some people...they're high as a kite.
They'll talk to a lampost. People watching them think they're crazy.

They're not. They're stuck using drugs, and nobody cares.

The best people in phone sales are addicts. They're so good because they've mastered twisting stories to get money for drugs--since their lives depend on it. Sales are great well when you twist stories, because your life depends on making that sale.

My brother did some crazy things. It was as if he'd turned on his animal instinct to survive. I don't judge him. Consider, if your family would be hungry, your baby malnourished and your wife sick--and you had no normal way to get money--you'd come to a place in yourself where you'd twist stories, and worse, to get by.

That's exactly how Michael felt.

Michael's Dad:

All users feel they have no choice.

The drug does not discriminate.

It **will not** discriminate.

- It'll take you if you're rich. If you're wealthy the drug is going to love you. It's getting fed.
- If you're poor, the drug is *still* going to love you--it will turn you into a creature that will go through leaps and bounds, like never before, to get more.

Do this: Tell your children, the people you love, or your students that drugs are not a thing of choice.

The Uninvited Guest

Oxy starts to infect you. It interacts with your kids. Your girlfriend. Work. Everyone around you has to learn how to live with it. It has something in common with ADHD or AIDS, because it's something that affects everyone. But oxy--it's not something you're born with, or a disease that you get against your will. It's something that you choose. Oxy, in the beginning, is something you want, and put into your body...

...having *no idea* what's going to happen.

It starts by choice.

It ends against your will.

Oxy is nothing but a disease once you're hooked. No different than HIV. It's part of you, and you have to learn to live with it. To *pay* for it. (Somehow.) And keep your symptoms in check.

Living Next to Addiction

My brother started to joke about it. He would joke to the extreme---when people are in recovery they share war stories. My brother loved to shoot heroin, but when he smoked crack, it's an insane high. My brother would laugh and say, "You know, I got so messed up, I sh*t myself."

He used to sit on the toilet and shoot.

As a member of his family, after years of addiction, it really starts to bother you. You're always waiting for something to go wrong. Really wrong. You're waiting to get *the call*. If I got a call at a random time from my Mom, I'd start to fight with her, because I was so anxious about Michael.

"What are you calling me about?" I would say, almost angry. And if I got two missed calls? From my Mom and my Dad? I'd be in full-panic mode.

You wonder how it's going to happen:

*Is my mom going to tell me over the phone?
Is she going to say, 'Jeff, fly home?'*

Leaving me to fill in the nauseating dots.

Thinking things like that, there's only so much you can take when you're actually *with* the person who is causing you and your family all of this crazy pain. In the last year, I said to Mom: "Either I'm coming up for Christmas or he is."

She told me, "I'm not going to tell him you said that." So in the end, I didn't go home for Christmas.

What It Feels Like to Lose Your Brother

Losing my brother is the worst pain I've ever felt in my life.

I was around death from a pretty young age. Death is nothing new to me. But this is totally different. When this kind of pain hits, you'll see the Xanax, you'll see the pain pills infect more people in the family--the survivors.

Because it just hurts so bad.

If you have any care, you have to think about your family--that they have to live the rest of their lives like this, with you gone. It's different for everybody. We all go through grief differently. Some people sleep in their kids beds. For years. As if the addiction and battle weren't enough.

The aftermath is worse than what things were then.

My brother has only been gone for six months, and I don't even know who I am. I'm so sad inside. But outwardly, I'm a little nicer to people, like Michael was. I have a positive energy.

Sometimes I don't even know what to feel. It's just time. The only way out is with time. Whether you're sick, broken, trapped or imprisoned. Time heals. Time passes. And it ends you. When your clock is punched, you're gone. And there's no do-overs.

Treatment-seeking patients for opioid addiction and opioid-overdose death nearly quadrupled in 2010. One of my closest friends, Nick, died a month ago. One day before my brother.

Nick was older than me.

He was untouchable.

Nothing could take him down.

Except the three oxys that killed him.

When my brother died, I felt like I got robbed of the rest of my life with him. Can you imagine what that feels like? It's a life sentence for all of us.

Fentanyl

It's 50 times more powerful than heroin, and it flies through customs at 1/10th the cost, killing people left and right. Over 67,000 people and counting. That's gross negligence.

There are government officials in Washington who are trying to stop what happened to my brother. They're going after the pharmaceutical companies and the doctors. That's where it starts.

If you're clean--you're not just picking up and going to the corner to buy pills. You're not going to shoot up heroin. You're going to the doctor. It's the doctors, the big pharma who make big cash on opioids.

I'd do anything to keep Michael from getting pills. I'd go to the clinics my brother went to. I'd go to the doctor Michael wanted to get his next fix from, and mess it up for them. My brother wouldn't sign a HIPPA form. My parents forced him to sign it. They wanted to see everything the doctor in Boca was giving him.

But the doctors don't all care. And I know that people die every day from opioids--especially 25 to 35 year olds. A lot of people die in Florida.

And often, it starts with a prescription.

The Beginning of the End

I was in Costa Rica.

My parents called me and asked how the trip was. That wasn't why they called, though. They'd found Michael in the bathroom and he was *not okay*. My parents were so scared they didn't know what to do. They took Michael to the hospital.

We'd had our ups and downs. (Lot's of downs.)
Now he wanted to see me. It seemed like, he wanted to get clean.

Or at least, settle the tension with me, his older brother.

I was in Costa Rica until the 20th.
They flew my brother down on the 21st.

They packed up all of his stuff, and they searched everything. They did all they could to ensure he didn't have any drugs. I lived ten minutes from Miami airport. He landed. I shared my location with him.

But he never showed up.
I called him. No answer.

I called Dad. Without missing a beat, he said, "Go to the airport." I rushed. When I got there I called him as I was racing through the hallways. "Where do I find him?" I asked.

He said, "Check in the bathrooms."

I ran into the bathroom. And there I saw from beneath a stall, someone was inside. The guy wasn't moving. Sure enough, it was Michael. Out of it. Finding him when he was out of it like that in the bathroom at the airport, it was scarier than finding him...at the end.

So I spent the next two days with him.

I took his stuff. Found the drugs.
I flushed it.
Smashed his phone--threw it 39 floors down to the dumpster.
I gave him a hard enough time that he said, "That's it. I swear that's it! I swear that's it!!"

I took my guard down.

I thought he was really telling me straight. Bad idea. Worst idea ever. The lethal bag of fentanyl was just sitting there waiting for him. *Out of ten bags*, what are the chances that the *one bag* he had left was...

...it.

That's why this is such a dark world.
You're playing Russian Roulette.

The Seller

I have the address and phone number of the kid who is directly related to Michael's death. I know the doctor who got him pills. What steers me away from taking vengeance on these people is my faith. I know that Michael is in heaven--and I want to get there to see him.

I also know that he wouldn't want me to avenge him. He'd have too much compassion. He'd say, "The kid is 28 or 29 years old. He's just a kid getting money to get by."

I'd give my business to get my brother back. I'd give that pusher everything I have to never talk to my brother again.

Just don't talk to him. Don't sell to him. Take 10k from me.
Leave him alone.

At the End

I think Michael saw how much time he'd wasted. Especially given how much talent and blessings he had. His friends were starting families. He was going nowhere.

He was so sad that he went for the drug.

Maybe God gave him a chance, or a choice, with that last bag.

I saw the paramedics were getting him stable. Then one paramedic, he was looking at me, and motioned with his head as he worked to save Michael's life: *Maybe left. Maybe right.* When you see death a lot, you grow accustomed to how you speak about it.

Here was Michael, OD'd, and it was as if the paramedic held the scales of judgement in his hands, as my brother was dying on the floor.

It wasn't supposed to be this way.

My parents were going to see him the day before his birthday, and take him to rehab. They were thinking seriously about moving down here to Florida. Today, Florida only reminds them of Michael.

And Michael isn't here.

His death made me question how I walk on this earth. Even though he did drugs, he would stop and give homeless people a dollar. His loss really is my gain. My family's gain. I didn't think about death, not seriously, up until this past year.

If I died tomorrow, and I was judged, I'm not confident at my appeal.

I'm not prepared.

But I know my brother was.

My brother saw life from a different view. Like Lazarus, who had it bad in this world, but also knew compassion.

Bathrooms

I know six people who died in the bathroom:

Mark

Nickolous

Michael--my brother

Andrew

Nick.

That was my 2019.

Six funerals. One for my brother, and five for people equally close. Sometimes I get through the day and I come home and lose it. It's a whole day's worth of emotions. I get inside, look at a picture of my brother.

And I lose it.

What killed my brother? A bag of pure fentanyl. 3X the legal limit.

He was dead with one injection.

In my bathroom.

The Last 3 Weeks

Those last three weeks I spent with my brother are the most intense 20 days of my life. I'm super happy we had those three weeks. There was so much good. I literally saw him fighting with that demon. I would see the frustration. The anger. Then he would come to his senses and apologize.

He wasn't sleeping for days. Oxy gives you sleeplessness. Anxiety. Like your world is ending. It's really, really scary. Then at the end, something hit him like a wave of anxiety. I saw him fighting with himself to survive.

Those three weeks gave me a new perspective on what we lived through all those years. Those three weeks changed my life. Now I'm just trying to be a good human. I feel like a citizen of the planet. Not just an American. Even though I'm just walking on this planet like anyone else is.

Now I just want to be a good person.

I almost feel like he knew this was the end, and he had this unfinished business with me. In the middle of those three weeks I got arrested, and Michael bailed me out--and he made such a joke about it--that it's one of my favorite memories of him.

You can be really angry. Sad. Or try to make the best of it.

This gave me an opportunity.

This is my awakening into the person who I need to be.

In a way, my brother sacrificed himself for me.

The bad that he's done is nothing. He was so far from a bad person--the bad things were acts of desperation. He was an *amazing* person to strangers and people less fortunate than him. He was an angel to his girlfriend.

There's no doubt he's in a good place. He wasn't into greed, envy or jealousy. There wasn't a jealous gene in his body. He worked at Bloomberg and shopped at Walmart.

He didn't care.

Despite the money he went through and things he sold, like he hocked TVs for \$30 or \$40 bucks, there was one thing that he never did...

Love Is a Pair of Your Brother's Loafers

...I'd given him a present. A pair of loafers. Not just any loafers, but really expensive ones. Now, when he was crazy to sell anything, he could have sold those shoes for \$300 to \$400 dollars.

He could have sold those shoes I bought him for drugs. He'd slept in a car. He'd been homeless. He'd lived out of dumpsters. He had many moments where he would do anything for drugs.

...But he always kept those shoes.

Detox, Detox, Detox

You think they do it by choice. Until you realize it's a disease. At that point, you look at it totally differently. I'd say to my brother: "Just don't do it!"

And he'd say, "Jeff, I don't have a choice. I don't know what else to tell you."

For so long I didn't get it. Maybe too long. On television, you see that certain agencies are pushing to make oxy addiction a medical condition. It is--in that it changes how your brain works.

But that is NOT the way insurance companies see it. They don't pay for detox...

What Detox Costs

Michael's Dad:

I've spent tens of thousands of dollars out of my pocket that's not covered by insurance.

Jeff:

Detox coverage is seven days. Insurance sure doesn't pay for full time living once you're *out* of detox, and that's the time a person needs support for the long haul. You're stable, but you need care. Just not a doctor. And since it's not a "medical condition" there's no coverage, even though living in a post treatment center or a half-way home is expensive; we're talking 15-20k a month.

You'll have 30 days with rehab. They have nurses, staff. You're constantly being checked. But after that 30, the path to getting clean becomes an unregulated trail.

Michael's Dad:

I've seen the places. They're not anything that you would pay that kind of money for. The worst part of it is, that it's hard for these kids to get into safe houses. These people robbing them and putting them in an awful place.

They say we provide transportation, get you to meetings...it's not true.

They say they give drug tests...they don't.

Think about it: a house full of drug addicts, without supervision it's a recipe for disaster.

It's very difficult for an addict in detox to go into treatment. Most have a misdemeanor. When they come out of treatment they are not welcome in society. They can't get a job because they have a criminal record. They've been shoplifting. When retail hiring manager sees a shoplifting charge, or any charge for that matter, they're not getting hired.

It's not a financial planner or accountant.

It's a basic, generic job, and these employers can be selective. They've got 50 other people who don't have records.

So it's very difficult for them to be accepted back into society.

Halfway houses are slim on resources. In bad neighborhoods. Yet so many people are involved in aftercare that it's a huge industry.

Jeff:

If my Mom and Dad had Google back when this started...if they had a resource that explained the signs of early drug addiction. We'd all have learned how to handle it:

- Don't confront immediately
- Keep an eye open.

And why? So it doesn't go five years later.

At five years--if you make it--you need \$100 a day of your drug to survive and not be sick.

It's really millennials killing millennials in the drug world. And there's a lot of money in saving them. You start out driving buses for them. Then you open a halfway house. Then a treatment center. Pretty soon you have an empire. The price of oxy was \$5 dollars ten years ago. It's like a snowball effect, with big pharma leading the way--they cracked down and created regulation, an underground market that's plain as day, and a lot of unmarked drugs.

If that didn't happen, Michael would still be here.

Life After Detox

We know the halfway houses. They want every dollar you've got, and give you a bed with no sheets. You have people charging \$200 for a tiny house with 3 bedrooms, and they put 8 kids in it. There is very little support. People relapse.

Michael was in treatment at least six times.

The process...it's just not fair.

It's like taking a cancer patient, giving him six pills and saying, "We hope it goes away."

How do you become a participating member of society? Not happening. They're left to fend for themselves. I don't care if you're 17 or 57 years old. After drugs treatment, nobody wants you.

You can't get a good job, and you get discouraged.

You can't get a house, and you get discouraged.

You're poor.

So you go back to the drug.

It's Better Being High and Rich, Than High and Poor

When you're high and you're poor, it's okay. But if you're poor and *not* high, it's not okay. There are days when there is no money. You can't get your fix. So you go to new dealers. These dealers live in the craziest, scariest world. Most people don't see it--but it's happening everywhere. Being exposed to it, I see it clear as day.