**Chuck Hilger**

**Narrator**

**Amy Sullivan**

**Interviewer**

**January 19, 2017**

**New Brighton, Minnesota**

Chuck Hilger -**CH**

Amy Sullivan -**AS**

**AS**: I’m trying to get a whole picture of the people I’m interviewing. Their life story, how they got into the work or situation they are in, and a past, present, and future.

The other thing I will say is that I realized on the drive over here, I’ve known this for quite a while, you are the person who got me thinking about doing this, so thank you. It piqued my interest as an oral historian. You told me one time, we were having lunch a few years ago, I don’t even think my daughter was in recovery, and you said, If people don’t get on the bandwagon, if people don’t get on the ride with the changes in MAT [medically assisted treatment] and opioids, evidence based treatment, they are just going to be lost in the dust. As a historian that really intrigued me. It was really great this past semester to read all the stuff that I was able to finally read; many of the things you and I had already talked about. So, anyways, I just wanted to thank you.

Also, I wanted to thank you for the Minnesota Alternatives [Spring Lake Park, Minnesota] connection. They’re awesome. It feels good to me to have such a good organization being the fiscal agent.

**CH**: Thank you.

**AS**: We are at Meridian Hills Treatment Center in New Brighton, Minnesota. Can you state your name and tell me you give me permission for this interview?

**CH**: My name is Chuck Hilger and I give you permission to record this.

**AS**: I know some of your stories, and sometimes I might ask you things that I already know, but we are just trying to get it on tape. Can you tell your story a little bit? Where you grew up? What your childhood was like? Your family life, any experiences with substances, any struggles? Then we will move into your career and life.

**CH**: My youth was pretty uneventful. I grew up in a middle class neighborhood with an intact home and family.

**AS**: Where was that?

**CH**: St. Paul, Minnesota in an area called Frogtown, or as I like to say, in the shadow of the capitol. It is a few blocks from the capitol. Frogtown is a really diverse area; it’s got a long history of being diverse. We are on the very east end of that, almost to Rice Street. If you head down Rice Street to the north you will get solely Italian, Germanic, Irish; all Caucasian neighborhood. I grew up at the intersection of those two places.

I was raised Roman Catholic. I went to an inner city, private Catholic school. I mean the four hundred dollars a year private school just so we are clear on that. [laughs] I almost didn’t say private because it usually connotes something else. My eighth grade graduating class there was eight of us in the grade. Well, there were thirteen: eight boys and five girls. We were together for most of those seven years. Being in the inner city you wouldn’t think it would be such a small school. It wasn’t because it was exclusive either.

Stereotypical blue-collar neighborhood. Nothing too remarkable growing up. There is a piece of it in the culture and the time of it all that everything revolved around sports. I was never gifted in those areas. I have a lazy eye so my depth perception is off so I couldn’t play sports.

**AS**: What year were you born?

**CH**: 1964. I’m fifty-two years old. I really stayed in the neighborhood until eighth grade. After eighth grade I met some people outside of the neighborhood and really expanded my horizons. It is really bizarre in a place where your worldview of yourself is based on your community. Then I went to a place where I was hanging out with the coolest guy in the school: my sister’s boyfriend. It was kind of culture shock.

High school was relatively boring. I started working when I was fourteen or fifteen doing furniture refinishing for a guy across the street.

**AS**: Did you go to Catholic high school?

**CH**: I did. I went to St. Bernard’s high school from ‘79 to ‘83. I graduated in ‘83. I didn’t put a whole lot of effort into school. It was Catholic school, but I wasn’t really academically focused. I had other external interests. I did get into a lot of trouble. I have narcolepsy, which is a sleep disorder. Falling asleep is really easy for me. I didn’t know this until I was in my early twenties.

I used to get things on my report cards like ‘diligent’ and ‘conscientious’ student ‘when awake.’ [laughs] I had problems in high school because people thought I didn’t care. It was more that I just couldn’t stay awake. Narcolepsy is like in any situation where it is easy for a person to fall asleep it is just ten times easier for me. Excessive daytime sleeping -- so, classrooms; especially if it’s not a topic you’re interested in at that stage in your life. I had a lot of problems staying awake. That really colors a person’s world because of the way people think about you.

**AS**: Did we know much about narcolepsy at that time?

**CH**: We did! We studied it in psychology. You know those clips they have of the dogs that run around and then fall over? But I slept through that chapter. [laughs] We did study it in high school.

**AS**: But you didn’t know you had it?

**CH**: Yeah, it just never occurred to me. I was always pretty outgoing, ambitious; I was a risk taker, but nothing extreme. I decided I wanted to go into law enforcement. When I was in high school it seemed like a logical thing to do. Not being one of the ‘in’ kids in the original neighborhood. I took a lot of -- I hesitate to call it abuse, but there was a lot of bullying. That stays with a person. I think that was probably a big driver between choosing that profession. I went into the military police corps army. I joined my senior year. A couple of weeks after I graduated I went off to basic training.

**AS**: In the Army?

**CH**: Yes. In the Army National Guard. I went straight to the National Guard because I thought I’d go straight back to school. I had two years of schooling and then went into the law enforcement.

There are some things that happened along the way. First, when I was a senior in high school my high school sweetheart got pregnant. She went home to Washington state to live. That was always weighing heavy on my mind. My daughter was born February 1, 1983 so that was before I graduated.

I went off to basic training. With regard to alcohol or drug use by the time I was a junior I was smoking cigarettes frequently. The neighborhood bar we could go into and shoot pool, so probably by sixteen -- rarely, never a problem with my parents, never a problem with my school, but around sixteen, seventeen, eighteen. Nineteen was the drinking age in the state at the time. The bartenders knew we were underage but as long as you were behaving yourself and at least someone’s parents were in the bar you’re okay. I still would hang around with that really cool kid, he’s now my brother-in-law.

**AS**: He’s now your brother-in-law?

**CH**: Yeah, right. My sister’s only boyfriend. They have been together for like fifty years now or something I think. She’s fifty-five. [laughs]

There was really no alcohol or drug abuse. There was the occasional binge -- mom and dad were out of town or something. I experimented with marijuana. I was never a fan; I never liked the way it made me feel. It didn’t work for me, so to speak. I definitely did like alcohol.

I went out to basic training, was at basic training for two years, came back home, and moved to Washington state for a couple of weeks to meet my daughter and see if perhaps I was going to be a resident of Washington state, but that didn’t work out so well.

I came back home. I never thought I was smart enough to go to college. When you grow up in that blue-collar environment where your parents didn’t go to college. I’m one of thirty-five cousins, and I’m one of the younger ones, there are five that are younger than me, but they are all union drivers, union machinists; they are all blue-collar jobs. Everyone in my family was, and they all live in the metro [metropolitan area of Minneapolis and St. Paul]. My extended family isn’t spread out. Our family vacations meant going up to a resort with our aunts and uncles for a week or two in the summer, which was magical. Believe it or not, it was. It was a great experience. Ironically these are still the resorts that we have a travel trailer at. They didn’t have travel trailers back then. We have a summer place up there so that is where we spend our weekends during the summer. When I talk to my boys, who at this point are twenty-eight and twenty-nine, my son and my step-son, those are their best memories of growing up. Up with the trailer at the lake and playing board games. We never loved Nintendo or any of that stuff. No electronics. Just family time.

**AS**: How many siblings do you have?

**CH**: I have one sister.

**AS**: What did your parents do?

**CH**: My father worked for the post office and was a mail handler. He did that for thirty-five years. He did insurance for a year or two, but that wasn’t really his thing. He is really one of those -- going to work is really a function for earning an income for stability. He always paid the bills on time, he never extended into debt. He squeaks when he walks is all I’ll say. To this day! [laughs]

True story: we talked him into buying a new travel trailer two years ago and he said, I’m only going to do this if I can use my bonds. His savings bonds. Because he had been collecting them from 1975. They had fully matured fifteen years ago, they weren’t even gaining anything, but he’s still got them. Heaven forbid he ever cashed something in. Then I said that he could have bought some pretty nice travel trailers with that. I’ve been helping him through some of that process.

Mom did factory jobs and then for the last fifteen years she works in the kitchen at Hamline [University, St. Paul, Minnesota]. My mom grew up on the west end of St. Paul over on Seventh Street. Her family had a fair amount of substance abuse; alcohol issues. Solid, Irish family: Madigans. Second cousins to the mayor Chris Coleman in the city of St. Paul.

My father, the reason for his need or desire for stability was that he moved a lot. Every year it was a different school, that sort of thing. My mom was from a family from five or six and my dad was from a family of five.

**AS**: So they created some real stability that they didn’t have.

**CH**: Absolutely. Don’t get me wrong they went out and had their fun. They bowled a lot. I know this probably comes as a surprise that they are bowlers. [laughs] Not until three years ago were they bowlers. Age has finally taken its toll. You could write a sitcom and it would be really boring. Very standard. Not punitive, just very structured. Monday night was Swanson chicken, Tuesday night was whatever.

Dad worked second shifts so I didn’t really develop a relationship with him, but my grandparents were in the duplex downstairs. My grandfather and my grandmother and I were pretty close on my dad’s side. My dad bought the house with the grandparents living downstairs in order to provide stability for them. My grandfather was a truck driver and a cab driver and whatever driver and whatever he needed to do.

**AS**: You went back --

**CH**: I went into the guard, and I came back and started school for law enforcement and started having trouble with the narcolepsy working in a security job position. That’s what guys trained in the military tactics police do. It is easy to get jobs. My narcolepsy started flaring up when I was nineteen or twenty. I got my first DWI [driving while intoxicated]. I fell asleep while driving a vehicle. It was on Highway 12 up by Highway 100; there’s a really steep drop off. Now there’s a big wall. Actually, they dug it all out. Anyway, I got in a car accident. I had literally fallen asleep behind the wheel. I did blow a point one three -- point zero eight is the legal limit. So, knowing what I know now, point one three is not really anything, but I seemed to be fairly sensitive to alcohol.

I told them I had fallen asleep behind the wheel and that is actually what got me to go in and do a test for the narcolepsy. I was going to use it as a defense. [laughs] It doesn’t change the fact that you are a point one three, but when you’re nineteen you do what you do. That’s how I found out I had the narcolepsy. They started treating it then with a stimulant, which was not an issue for me except I like to drink and I couldn’t mix them. I quit taking the stimulants and just dealt with it. It was much easier just to deal with it then than it is now just because of my age and vitality, I think.

I have always been a driven individual. I’m always looking for things that are new and interesting. In high school I did the McDonald’s and Burger King thing. I refinished furniture and continued to refinish furniture for years. I did the security thing, got the DWI and lost my license and that doesn’t go too well. I thought I would try my hand at sales. I became a vacuum salesman. That was my first sales job. My second sales job was raising funds for what is called United Arts Council, which is now the Ramsey County Arts Fund, I believe. This is back when they were trying to buy the land for the Ordway theatre -- don’t look back at when that was built! I had a knack on the phone for doing that. I didn’t even know it at the time. I thought I was just doing the same as everyone else. It wasn’t something that was really satisfying, if you will. But, I was successful at it and I stayed at it for like a year.

I got involved with some guys that were running a multi-level marketing business with a carpet cleaning business on the side. It was called Music Biz. We grew that into a two thousand person international down line -- when you buy a record and your friend buys a record and you get the idea of the whole multilevel thing. It got so popular that we were on KDWB [Minnesota radio station] back in the day. The state attorney general came in and investigated us because we had so much publicity and so much going on.

**AS**: What was that called again?

**CH**: The name of the thing was Music Biz -- that’s what we called it. We had a jingle written and everything. I would sing it, but I sing really poorly. I don’t know why it is still in my head!

For them I did a lot of the maintaining of the databases, which was quite arduous back then. I think we are talking ‘84, ‘85. The other thing was to maintain the mailing list and send out all the fliers, reminders, and checks to the people that were earning all their downloading income. That went really well until we decided that the two thousand person download was so successful that we should just move to another product and just pick up the pyramid and move it to another product as is, then we would be fine. That bit of diversification was like trying to move a sandcastle. It just doesn’t work. It collapsed and we had gotten so big that I had hired a mailing company to do the mailing lists for us. I started doing that.

Before that I did do a year or two of factory work. I knew working in the factory I would find myself being very angry for no reason at all. It just wasn’t suited for me, which is really hard for a person who comes from a family where that’s what everybody does. Why wouldn’t you? What is your problem? Why would you screw up this job? I worked at an envelope manufacturer. I worked in shipping and receiving and did that for a year and a half. I branched off of that job into this entrepreneurial piece. I did that for a while.

My drinking, once I hit the drinking age of nineteen, definitely escalated. A lot of it was culturally informed. I enjoyed going out to the clubs and dancing and all that fun stuff, but I definitely consumed more on a regular basis than would be healthy. Binge drinking, of course, is if it is any more than five as it is defined now.

I managed to pick up a second DWI about that same time. I got pulled over for going from a friend’s house to a bar. I got pulled over and was point one zero and they gave me a DWI for that. I was even where I was going. I was like, Look, there are my friends in the window! They were like, Wave goodbye because you’re going the other direction. Part of that had to do with the fact that I had a lot of driving after suspensions. When you have narcolepsy it is considered a seizure disorder. You have to go see a neurologist, I think at that point it was once a year. He would have to sign off saying I hadn’t had any episodes and that it was okay for me to drive. I wasn’t taking my medication so I wasn’t being prescribed; I wasn’t going to the doctor and all of that. They wouldn’t get the letter, they’d suspend my license, I’d get pulled over, I’d get a ticket, I’d get a warning, I would have a fine to pay, I wouldn’t pay the fine, it would get revoked, so forth and so on. I think that background, too, led to the fact that they would say, This guy has got multiple violations, previous DWI two years ago. We should probably do something about this. I want to be fair to those making that judgment call. Of course at this point I was like, I was so innocent! [laughs] They pulled me over because I rolled a stop sign at faster than pedestrian walking speed -- that’s what it says on the ticket. California stop is what they call it. It was on a side street.

Alcohol for me can be a real -- I tend to think big picture and over the top anyway, so when you add alcohol the first thing to go is judgment. That’s one step closer to making bad decisions. Alcohol consumption for me is something that has to be closely monitored. At this point I wasn’t really concerned or thinking about it.

I met my first wife when I was working at the factory. I did a lot of dating and a lot of going out. I was the guy that had the constant nine-month relationship. Sometimes I hadn’t even ended the first one before I started the second one. That wasn’t a rule depending on how things went.

During that whole time I really didn’t have any idea that I might be smart. All I have sorting the world externally, what I did, I had an external viewpoint at this point. I did okay in the military, although I had trouble staying awake in those classes too. I graduated high school with a two point something. I wasn’t the guy that the guidance counselor was like, We’ve got to get you to take the SATs [scholastic assessment test] because you’ve got a big future. I had a low self-esteem. I think I wanted to prove something. I was always looking outside of myself. People that appear to be happy and have it together, who have an external orientation, this is what they do and how they have it. We don’t get to understand the complexity of their world view, but this is how they have it. At twenty-one -- and this is coming up on the yuppie time, the eighties. That’s really an important factor because I thought I had something to prove and was always doing work.

**AS**: But, you didn’t feel like you were smart?

**CH**: No, no. That’s why I didn’t go to college. I figured I would figure something out one way or another.

**AS**: But, you knew you could figure it out.

**CH**: I was a creative problem solver. That was always a skill, but not a recognized skill necessarily. You can’t really put that on an application. It’s great, because you always seem to stay out of trouble just at the last minute, escape harm’s way at the last minute. You are just one step ahead of the next situation. Always drawn to the exciting fast lane. I was in my early twenties.

I was generally really stable. My parents owned the duplex and my grandparents had moved out. When I was a sophomore and junior in high school working at McDonald’s I met a guy a couple of years older than me who had moved here from Flint, Michigan to live with his older brother and have better options here in Minnesota. We became friends and we are still close today. We lived downstairs in my parents’ duplex. This is the kind of guy that you live with for five years and you never have a fight. It’s just like that. Maybe over who ate the last piece of pizza, but that’s about it.

Reasonably stable. I did the factory job, met my future wife, doing these entrepreneurial jobs which doesn’t do much for the cash flow. Keeping things going whichever way I could. In ‘85, ‘86 the small business I was involved with closed down. The guy that had been doing our mailings offered me a job selling mailing services. Labeling mailing services and stuff like that. I thought, Okay, why not. It was a straight commissioned job, of course, and I took that and grew that over the next four years pretty successfully into specialty services. We had a niche there. This was before inkjet printers, so we would do what looked like a typed envelope, but we had a machine process for getting it done. It was a very expensive thing to have done, but we would have like two million piece mailings from American Express. I got in with some other companies like I.C. Systems, which also does mail. I went out to San Francisco and landed a big American Express account. I’m like twenty-four and this is the only time I’ve been on a plane is to go to basic training and back.

This is a guy who thinks he’s not very smart; I knew I was street savvy and can get by and figure things out. I did that until that person doing that business wasn’t paying taxes. I got a letter in the mail at the office that he owed payroll taxes. I took that product line I had developed and I moved it to a large agency in downtown Minneapolis. I sold them on the idea of it and sold it to a couple of employees and went and did that. They washed me out pretty quick. I learned the difference between a small family owned business that was just getting off the ground to working in the corporate environment where you actually have to produce and so forth and so on. Some of the accounts and the markets were just at that next level where you were working with those ad agencies and big players. While I had done well working in the direct marketing group in the Twin Cities -- I had a lot of connections and knew a lot of people -- it wasn’t amounting to enough work so after nine months they let me go.

At that point, it was ‘89 and my future wife and I had a child in ‘88, my son Steven. He was a year and a half old. My wife still worked in the envelope factory. I got this really good job and they gave me a really big signing bonus and nine months later it was all gone. We went out and had bought a house. There was a lot of stress at that point. I had also got a job at the post office at the bulk mail center and I was doing ten-key and I’m not a ten-key person. I only did that for a short time but I knew that wasn’t going to work. A lot of mild chaos.

Occasional drug use. I had tried cocaine at that point a couple of times. Nothing that had amounted to anything. I didn’t even get it, so to speak. Alcohol was still an issue from time to time. Binge drinking again, not black out drinking or anything. Still struggling with the driving issues because I am supposed to be going to the doctor’s and I’m not.

**AS**: This is almost ten years later!

**CH**: Yeah, it had been a while. When I lost the job at the downtown Minneapolis firm I opened up my own practice because I thought that would be a good idea. I opened up this small, broker advertising letter shop. I didn’t actually do the work, but I brokered all the services. I had brokered so many services for so many years and putting all these packages together that I knew most of the printers in town, I knew all the mail shops, I had all the connections. It was just a matter of landing the accounts. Quite frankly it went really well for the first year. I made one hundred and fifty to two hundred thousand dollars worth of business. Thirty percent of that was what I got to take home and that was more than enough. So, here we go again.

Ultimately, I kept growing the accounts I was making over about a year and a half to two year period. We are now at 1989, 1991. The Gulf War has broken out, the economy is taking a dump, and things aren’t necessarily going to great. I land a big account out of Mason City, Iowa to do Who’s Who mailings. If you send fifty bucks you can be in the book. Those mailings typically go out typically in one hundred thousand pieces and they want a high end product, which is what I specialized in. The nice thing about doing a high end product is that you always have a market. I did that mailing and got it out. Ultimately, they didn’t pay. My normal vendors who had done the job were like, We can’t keep doing your bread and butter jobs. Now we’ve got this big one hanging out there and it’s all this money. They put their attorney’s on the company. We all worked it out, but ultimately it was the end of that business. That was hard.

There were a lot of technology changes; email is coming along, the Internet was just hitting the market. There were a lot of changes there. As my business declined my drinking really took off. As did spending money on things like pull tabs or gambling. That impulsive kind of stuff took over. I had bought a townhome with my wife as the business had taken off. I was always doing things slightly on the sly. I was contracting -- it was assumable. I think I made one payment for the year and a half that I was in the house. It took them like a year to get you out.

I think 1991 I still had a job with the post office and started carrying mail for the post office as a letter carrier. I was backing out the garage and I slid into a parked car. I actually had my license for a few years at that point. It was an icy slope and I hit a car so I lost my job. I had some friends who were hanging cable up in Brainerd so I went to Brainerd and was installing cable systems. Apparently I was a cable specialist now. Climbing up ladders.

I was up in Brainerd on February fourteenth, my ex-wife has a flair for the -- that was when she moved out of the house with the kids. We had a son together and she had had two boys. For the last six years we had been together so I had been raising them. One was six months old when we got together. The other one was three. They were eight, six, and our son was in preschool. That gives you an idea. That was a huge turning point for me because that was such a loss. That external focus, you know, if you have a nice house, two-car garage, then you are doing okay because that’s how it would appear. I really struggled to have all that stuff and it all collapsed.

The drinking took off.

**AS**: Had you been struggling in your marriage? Did that come to a surprise for you?

**CH**: I really think it was that this is the pattern that people follow. Not that I did any of it in the right order. You don’t have a baby, then graduate high school, then go into the service, then have another baby, then buy the house, then get married. All this time the relationship with my daughter is they come out or I go out once a year, send birthday cards, and that was about it. She had a great stepdad that she called dad; I was more of the stepdad. We kept the connection but it wasn’t really deep. Her stepdad was great.

I lost the two boys I had been raising, I lost the house, and still we didn’t get divorced. We did whatever we could do. We struggled. She was very conservative about how she went about things. I was much more like, We will figure it out, it will work out. Her belief was that as I excelled or did well or did less well in business -- she was still working at the factory -- she was being left behind. Marketing and advertising is all this stuff, even back then: five hundred dollar suits, thousand dollar briefcases. That was just a big issue for us. She had met a guy at work that was the picture of stability. He was a single guy, farmer family, Somerset, Wisconsin. Just the epitome of stability and whatever. For her it was the right move at that time.

After that, I think it took me two weeks to get my third DWI. One was when I was nineteen, one when I was twenty, and then one when I was like twenty-eight. It was 1992. I’m trying to think of what year it was. It was three DWIs in ten years. I blew a point one three again. I got pulled over because I was doing fifty-five and I passed a state trooper at one thirty in the morning. I was doing fifty-five. He said, You should know that if you are ever on the freeway at one thirty in the morning you should never pass a state trooper. I said, I was doing fifty-five. He said, I know, I was doing fifty and you passed me. Did you hear me? You should never pass a state trooper at one thirty. [laughs] I didn’t do anything wrong, I just got pulled over. It was three in ten.

The post office called back and said, You’re right. We made a mistake. Here’s a bunch of back pay for the year. I had gone to the union and said it was an accident because it was on the ice. It was their truck, in their driveway, in their parking lot. Anyway, now I don’t have a license. You can’t be a mail carrier without a license.

Anyway, somebody had introduced me to cocaine in the crack form, which I had never tried before. I was off to the races. That put me in all kinds of circles. From the time I was twenty-eight until I was thirty-one it was just one big go. Having grown up and living where I grew up at the crosshairs of Rice Street and Frogtown I had plenty of gang affiliated members that I could be around by going to certain places. Then I had all my friends on Rice Street who didn’t have access to crack at that point, which was largely an African American gang thing.

For the next year and a half it was pretty interesting. Parents of the kids who were in the gangs -- the gangs who were burning down those houses and killing families; I never really thought twice about it. I didn’t get excited about being caught up in the mix because for some reason it doesn’t really faze me much. I had an acquaintance in the escort service so I drove escorts around. I would drive them to their appointment and wait in the car. A whole nefarious group of people.

**AS**: Are you saying these are things that you wouldn’t normally do, but since you were using you were doing?

**CH**: I would do those things to be able to continue to use. I didn’t have any regular income. I was refinishing furniture again. I would work for three days, make three or four hundred dollars, then go and light crack. Then use and sell, use and sell, use and sell for three or four days. Then go work for three days. I probably kept that pattern up for quite some time.

**AS**: Did your parents ever know?

**CH**: No. My parents never knew. My best friend, he was the best man at my wedding, never knew. I don’t think I’ve ever told anyone this.

**AS**: Would you disappear for a few days?

**CH**: There was no disappearing because it was just me. My children are with my ex-wife; I would have my son every other weekend. I never used when I had my son because he was there. That was the arrangement her and I worked out -- that standard every other weekend. I wasn’t paying child support at that time. I would use several days in a row and it didn’t matter the day of the week. It was a lot of gang activity. You start selling to support your habit and you find yourself in a lot of interesting groups and around a lot of interesting people.

I tend to be fairly loud and outgoing, which culturally fits better with more of an aggressive African American male stance, so I never had a problem finding a comfortable spot in that group. I did look a little bit like a cop, so people would sometimes challenge me to smoke their drugs to prove I wasn’t a cop -- which I was completely fine with. Are you convinced yet, because if not I can do some more of it!

There was a point when I was losing my advertising business and I was starting to get into cocaine and my wife had gone. I could get off the plane at five o’clock in my suit, drive home, throw on a pair of jeans and a hoodie, and be down on the block in a completely different lifestyle. I was just really a chameleon. No real sense of identity or way of things that had to be any particular way.

**AS**: What were you going to tell me that you said you have never told?

**CH**: It was my wife who told me that I was smoking crack.

**AS**: What do you mean?

**CH**: Well, the first time I used was with these friends of mine. They said, Try this! Or whatever. I knew it was cocaine and I knew we were smoking cocaine, but I didn’t know it was crack. It just really hadn’t hit where crack was --

**AS**: It was the media.

**CH**: The media to a degree. It was like, What do you mean painkillers are just like heroin? You know what I mean? It was like, That is cocaine. What’s fascinating is that she is this person that never did any drugs. She liked to drink but she never did any drugs or anything. She is the person that schedules what times the kids get up and what time they put their shoes on and what time they are standing at the door. She’s very organized and structured. The opposite of me, I guess.

She was like, You realize that’s crack? I had heard about crack but I didn’t know what it was. I know that sounds silly. For somebody who’s fairly street smart, who is used to being in the mix -- I’ve got friends who are Hells Outcast on Rice Street. They’ve been long time gang members. Many notorious names and people that I know and still run into from time to time in different places. Then the whole gang thing. I think in the first couple of weeks I told her. She said, What did you spend your money on? Well, somebody gave me this drug. You realize that’s crack? I didn’t, but it’s funny that she enlightened me. I don’t think I’ve ever shared that with anybody. The kind of thing you wouldn’t want to admit. She was from Blaine. [laughs]

**AS**: Are we in the eighties or nineties?

**CH**: The business went down in ‘92 so this is starting in late ‘91.

**AS**: So kind of early in what came to be the so-called crack epidemic?

**CH**: Yeah, yeah. For Minnesota it certainly was. It was never here like it was -- like we think of the crack epidemic you think of it more in the phase that it was in in Los Angeles. It just never hit that level of height over here.

There were a couple of close calls I had with houses where we were moving dope. One of the big gangs in St. Paul, part of the Disciples, had a major connection. Because the kids were in the gangs and this was the stepdad of one of the kids in the gang, we could essentially get access to as much as we wanted. He had the connection so I did more of the driving and the facilitating, so forth and so on. It wasn’t anything that I ever got compensated well for. They were moving a fair amount of weight and that drew some attention. There were a couple of federal cases.

There was actually a book written about it. A house fire on Lawson [Avenue] in St. Paul where five kids died. One was Andre Coppage and his brother Lester. Anyway, there is a whole book written about that group. They waited five or six years to prosecute on that. They gathered them from around the country. There were big articles from around the country about how they brought all these people back from Florida. I think this book is called ‘The Red Light’ [*Code of Silence: The Andre Coppage Story* by Ann Lee] or something. It has been a while since I read it. Some really fascinating stuff.

That is the level. You have a lot of low-level gang stuff, but this was where people were killing people and fire bombing houses. The person’s whose car they used was a friend of mine. They traded his car for the night for some crack cocaine. He had lost his car behind that. I was right on the edge of being really deep in. I was at the house on a regular basis. I was never caught up in it like that. I got caught coming out of a house one night after a party. Of course, no driver’s license because we are back to that again.

**AS**: But you are still driving around?

**CH**: Of course. At what point do you need to stick your driver’s license into the car to make anything run? [laughs] When they solve that problem, then it’s golden. Until then, I’ve got my keys.

I came out of a house one night, it was a prostitution house, and we had been partying and the police were in the alley where my car was parked. I didn’t have anything on me but they put me in the back of the squad. There are now people standing on the back of this porch because I’m out in the alley in the squad. There was a female officer and a male officer. They asked me all these questions like, Who is inside? You know that is a known prostitution and drug house. No, I met this girl named Tammy at the bar and she said this is where she wanted to go so this is where I brought her. They knew that was my car back there and they said, You’re going to get in your car and go home, right? I said, Yeah, absolutely. They let me out of the car and the woman cop gets out -- she was in the passenger seat -- and lets me out. I wasn’t cuffed. She goes, God, Chuck. Good to see you again! Thanks for all the information. [laughs] Just to mess with me. She must have really bought that I wasn’t from the area.

**AS**: To throw you under the bus in front of everybody.

**CH**: It didn’t get me in any trouble because the people over there knew me. This is just a really interesting time with interesting people. A lot of pain and a lot of suffering. I have seen a lot of really ugly things. I never got really caught up in the criminality of it, thank God. Excuse me, other than selling drugs.

That continued for some time. I was still going to the bar and drinking regularly. I had a steady girlfriend and we were out one night and we were pulled over because we were waiting for someone to run in and pick up some drugs. A squad had seen me and run my plates and pulled up on me. I’m driving after license cancellation -- three DWIs -- inimical to public safety [DAC-IPS]. A cancelled IPS is what they refer to that as. There is no way out of this. I’m going to the ADC -- adult detention center.

At that point in my life I wasn’t good at being alone or standing still for any amount of time -- let alone in a six by six foot room having no control. I called a buddy of mine who agreed to bail me out. He was the one I had been working on the furniture with since I was fourteen and now I’m thirty-one years old. He came and bailed me out. It was six thousand dollars. The bond was six hundred bucks so he paid that. This is a guy who still goes to Latin mass. [laughs] Do you know what I mean? He won’t wear shorts because if some woman were to have sexual thoughts about him he would be responsible. This is my world.

**AS**: This is old school.

**CH**: This is old school. Anyways, he was the guy you could never do wrong by. There was one other time when they had brought me in on a driving after cancellation -- they got me one other time -- I was down in Ramsey County ADC and they said, All the guys going to Hennepin County stand on the left side of the room, which was where I was supposed to go. For the guys they were going to let go stand on the right side of the room. I stood on the right hand side, they handed me my shoelaces on the way out the door and I was gone. They weren’t going to let me go this second time -- they were onto me. I couldn’t have my friend give me the six grand. I just could never do that. I went to court. I had three DWIs in ten years, I’ve got all kinds of driving violations, and I have no license. The judge told me I was going to do thirty days. He said, If you ever want your license back you need to go to treatment. If you don’t complete treatment you can’t get your license back.

I won’t go into detail but there are a number of other business things that I had done. I was trying to work my way back into sales. I took a job selling satellite dishes for a year and a half down in Winona. Driving back and forth. I had done a number of things. I did asbestos removal for a year because that paid pretty well.

**AS**: When you say you have always worked you have always worked.

**CH**: I have always worked. I have never collected a day of unemployment in my life. I have always had at least one job and sometimes two. There were just a variety of other experiences thrown in there while I was trying to get out of that drug lifestyle.

I knew it wasn’t going anywhere. I knew I wasn’t going to make a living out of furniture refinishing. It was the base. Then I would try to do this and that. The judge told me I needed to go to treatment if I wanted to get my license back ever. That is what got me in. December 1994.

One of the most devastating things I remember was Christmas of 1994 I had spent all of the money that I saved up for Christmas presents on drugs. I managed to gather up some more to buy Christmas presents again, but just that hopeless feeling. December of ‘94 I was about done. My court date was in January of ‘95, so I went into court and the judge said do this alcohol drug assessment. My previous DWIs they had told me I had to go to AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] meetings. I had to do two days in Lino Lakes doing their education program. It’s not like I hadn’t had plenty of consequences. I went in this side room with this young lady that was the assessor and she asked me -- I swear to God it wasn’t more than six questions. She came back and said that I had alcohol abuse whatever. Of course I didn’t say anything about the cocaine because why would I? The judge said, Yeah, you have to go to treatment. I said, I can’t pay for treatment. He said that there was something called Rule Twenty-five. You have to go do that and if you [1:01.19]. I said, I’ll do that and he gave me thirty days. I went and did my thirty days.

I really like playing darts. I had thirty days but I got out on work release because I told them I was still refinishing furniture. I would hang out at the shop even if there wasn’t work. On dart nights I would still go to the bar and play darts, ankle bracelet and all. But I wasn’t drinking! In case they came because they could come and test you at any time. I wanted to do my assessment and then go from the end of my thirty days right into treatment. I knew the only way to get into treatment was to get them to know it was bad enough to get a Rule Twenty-five. I went in there and I spilled my guts. I may have even enhanced a little bit to make sure I would get in. If I came out of the Rule Twenty-five and they said I didn’t need treatment, then what the hell am I going to do? Because I couldn’t get my license back.

I went in there and did a Rule Twenty-five. They gave me fourteen days inpatient treatment and ADEP.

**AS**: What is ADEP?

**CH**: Alcohol and Drug Addiction Program. It is with the Regions Hospital program. I went to treatment and I just went to my fourteen days so I could get my license. Thank God this is getting behind me. Still, being an external sorter, the worst thing you can do is put a person like that in group. Do you think anybody can keep a secret like that in group? Right?

**AS**: Being what?

**CH**: An external sorter.

**AS**: What is that?

**CH**: People have internal and external locuses of control. This is something that has been really useful in counseling over the years and working with people. How people view the world is often, especially with people who are involved with addiction, you can have a strong internal focus. You know these people because they already have all the answers. They don’t need you to tell them anything.

**AS**: Who?

**CH**: People who have an internal sense of self. They analyze, look at, and make decisions about their life based on their own information and data and process the decision that they have made. External people are like chameleons: they can become whatever they need to become in their environment, they become really good at reading things, thinking they fit in. I’m not saying they don’t stand out. They are driven by the environment as opposed to individual preferences.

Ideally, you want some of both. There are points where you need to be taking in data from the outside and times from yourself. I just always had a very -- at that point -- external point of reference. I just looked around seeing how other people did it and emulated that.

**AS**: To put you in group, you just mimicked what other people were saying?

**CH**: No, I just shared. When you have an external orientation you don’t have the need to protect or -- you know what I mean? When you are in those settings you just share. That happened to you? This happened to me, and this happened to me. I’ve been through this; I’ve been through that. They are like, See, you’re an alcoholic. You realize that the normal people don’t have to try to quit drinking.

I drank the Kool-Aid. Fourteen days after getting out of outpatient treatment I knew I was an alcoholic and an addict. I had shared all that stuff about the cocaine and the stuff I had been through. All the crazy stuff. It was fourteen days after I had finished my detox and they called me into the director’s office and he was like, Alright, you are going to be here for fourteen days and this is how it works. You will need to take a look at the books on the shelves; there are four up there for different halfway houses. I said, Sorry, halfway houses? He said, Yeah, the recommendation here from the Rule Twenty-five person is that you do fourteen days inpatient followed by ninety days at a halfway house. At which point I said, John, I can tell you have been doing this a while and I can tell you are good, but if you look around you can tell I have some of the same problems that the people we have in this treatment center are dealing with. I think after I am here for about a week you will see that I don’t have to finish the fourteen days let alone go to the halfway house. At which point he metaphorically pushed my nose into the ground. He said, It says here if you don’t complete treatment and the halfway house then you don’t get your license back.

I did my fourteen days and then I was three days in. I got into the program and I wasn’t faking it. I was like, Wow, I really have this issue. It is kind of like when you read the diagnostic and mental health manual for the first time and you have half of the stuff in there. It was like that. They give me a choice of these halfway houses. Three of them are in Frogtown and Dayton neighborhood. I was like, I am not going to those! There were two other choices. It was Cochran and Hastings, River Falls [Wisconsin], which is on the River Falls campus. They give you a day to go out there and check it out. They interviewed me and he said, Why do you want to come here? I said, I see you are on a college campus. I’ve never been to college before. I thought maybe while I was here I would take a class. I’m still moving a million miles a minute. Despite that interview they decided to take me.

I finished up my fourteen days and I was excited to go to River Falls. It is a really nice place, but it is a forty-minute drive from ADAP to River Falls, which is apparently how long it takes to undo fourteen days of treatment. I don’t think it was two hours after I got into the halfway house that I was sitting down with my primary counselor saying, Bob, if you review my records you will understand that I have been pretty successful in my life and I have got some really good things going for me. I have a house in St. Paul that I can go back to and live. Of course, the telephone is shut off and I haven’t paid my gas in two months. You’ll see. How long do I really need to be here? He said, Well, Chuck, it says here if you don’t complete ninety days you don’t get your license back! So, yeah, that’s a long ride from one place to another.

**AS**: How did you get the ride?

**CH**: They would take you. They transported you. I was their van, which was probably a good thing. Left to my own devices I would have gone for it. I did the ninety days. They have you do manual labor stuff. There was nothing wrong with it, but that’s the stuff that really makes me angry and annoyed. Now I am loading trucks again all day long and I have to pay for a ride to work to make like six dollars an hour. All these dichotomies.

**AS**: That is kind of a sort of humiliation.

**CH**: Yeah. A lot of grounding.

**AS**: I’m calling it humiliation and you are calling it a grounding. Is it both?

**CH**: I don’t think it should be humiliating because there is nothing humiliating about it. For me it wasn’t so humiliating as it was like back to the roots. Here is what my family does, throwing sacks. Again, nothing wrong with it, but I always thought there should be more. I was just frustrated.

**AS**: Okay. So you didn’t think it was beneath you, necessarily.

**CH**: No, no. Not beneath me. I could do it. I have always been in good physical shape. Well, I was. I finished my ninety days.

One of the most important things that happened to me while I was there was that I started doing more reading about addiction because I wanted to understand it. The differences between my time in sales and my training in counseling -- the skills are really very similar. There isn’t much difference. I had done all the Anthony Robbins and the Dale Carnegie; I had done all the training for sales. When you are sitting in group and listening to what people are saying as opposed to applying your own meaning for them I was actually functioning very supportively in group. I finally read *The Road Less Traveled* by Scott Peck, which talks about a number of things, but most important for me was a mapping of the world, what this means, what this isn’t. For me, it was a lot of things I had believed to be true, but it didn’t go with the world view I grew up with. It really was a remapping for me. That book launched me into a whole course of action and research and interests.

I finished my ninety days and I returned home. I took a job scraping forums. Like what they pour cement with. They bring them back and they are all dirty you have to scrape it out. In the yard scraping forums all days. I had to walk right past my old bar that I used to hang out at because I couldn’t drive. Now I am on the honesty program. I am involved in the twelve steps. I am trying to live a life of rigorous honesty. I don’t have my license; I’m not driving my car. I am halfway out of this program so the promises are going to come true if I just do what I need to do. I am going to meetings and got a job and I’m just getting started again.

I started drinking again. I never went back to the crack cocaine because that was a whole lifestyle. It was too far to go. My parents and in-laws were invited to the halfway house and I did tell them that I was using cocaine and they were pretty surprised. They really don’t know what that means. To them that means, My son was using drugs but he quit. They don’t understand the depth of it and it is hard for me to explain because it is so complex and convoluted. All the craziness, games, and desperation. I had a gun in my mouth one time. I wasn’t holding the gun.

I started to drink September 27, 1995. I went back to drinking for two months. I was in the bar and I looked up and they showed a picture of one of my best friends. When I first got into advertising at the company that was doing the envelopes and stuff I had met a guy who had done more than three years in Stillwater prison on three different occasions for stuff. In many ways we were cut from the same cloth but he just got caught and his connections went a little deeper than mine. I am more the guy that brings things together and connects things. He was the fighter.

For many years when we were running together he would keep me out of trouble and I would keep up moving forward. That was my connection. He did furniture refinishing with me when he needed money. Very close from 1985 until ‘95. I looked up and I saw that he was on the TV and he was being charged with vehicular homicide. He had borrowed my friend’s motorcycle that owned the refinishing company and at two o’clock in the morning someone had stepped off the curb in front of him and he hit him doing thirty. My friend blew a point one three which is waking up for him. His drinking was way worse than mine. That was the day I decided. To some degree the trouble that he got in I got in, but to a lesser degree. I thought, This is where this is going. On that day I decided to stop drinking.

I have never gone back to cocaine. The one thing that I was supposed to do with the halfway house that I didn’t do was go see a therapist. The next day I set up the appointment and I said, I was supposed to call after I left River Falls and I didn’t. I got set up to see him. I had my job so I just stopped the drinking thing, upped my meetings. At that point I was still going off and on.

I went and saw this therapist in part because of what happened in treatment and the halfway house and my own reading, I went and saw this person and I said, This is my scenario and this is where I’m at. He is an exceptional therapist and his approach was very effective. He asked me, Chuck, how smart are you? I said, I’m street smart. I can always figure out a way to get around, I can do what I need to do, I’m good at solving problems, I can do this and that. He said, Let me get this right. You were in the service and you did that successfully. I got out in ‘89. He said, You were in the service for six years, you were in sales, you were with a small business that you partially owned at the age of twenty-one or twenty-two, then you were building a company, twenty-six, twenty-seven you had your own company, you’ve been through drug treatment, you’ve basically lived on the street, you’ve nearly been homeless, you’ve survived just fine, we are sitting here having this conversation and you’re saying you’re not smart? [laughs] I said, Well, that’s street smarts and that’s how you get by.

He made me take an IQ test and it wasn’t off the charts or anything, it wasn’t near genius, but he asked me, Well, how smart are you? I said, How do you want me to define it? He said, IQ? I said, I have no idea. What is average? He said, One hundred. I said, I’m one hundred. I came back after I had taken the IQ test and he said, What was your score? I shared it with him and he said, What does that mean? Being an external sorter primarily at that point I said, Basically, it means short of doing rocket science or anything like that I could probably do anything I wanted to. He was like, Yeah, you’re right. His method of therapy was very effective for me. I went once a week for several months before backing off to twice a month and then tapering off.

Years later my mom, with all of her family issues growing up, I sent her to him because she has a lot of depression issues and he saw her for like three sessions and he said, She’s good, we don’t need to see her anymore. It was really disappointing for me. [laughs]

**AS**: Those are some pretty good coping skills, apparently!

**CH**: That was years after I had been to therapy but, yeah, that’s great. He said, We’re not going to talk about the twelve steps, that’s not what we’re here for. He was just very effective at throwing the proverbial bone and then I would go out and look for it for the week and I would come back with the bone and he would take that out of my mouth and throw it again.

A lot of what I wanted to believe in my heart of hearts was true, I just had to come to those things myself. I became a much better internal sorter, I became a much better ‘identity.’

**AS**: Did you go to college then?

**CH**: I was in the halfway house and one of my friends was supposed to help one of these guys move. I was on my way to church and this guy pulls over and asks if so-and-so is around and I say, No, he took off for the weekend, and he said, I need someone to move the couch. I said, I’m going to church. He said, Help me move this couch and I’ll drive you to church afterwards and I thought, This sounds scary! This from the guy who used to drive prostitutes! [laughs]

I go help him move this couch. He says to me that he had worked with guys from Kinnic Falls before, he had been DVR, Department of Vocational Rehab in Wisconsin and he told me if I wanted to go to school in Minnesota all I needed to do was go down to the Department of Rehabilitative Services and because I was a recovering alcoholic and drug addict, besides the fact that I have narcolepsy, they would pay for my schooling if I wanted to go to school for something.

**AS**: How strange that this guy just shows up and starts telling you all of this.

**CH**: I went and did my fifth step at this small church that I go to. The fifth step in the twelve steps is where you go and you share your shortcomings and character flaws with another person. You’ve done a searching a fearless moral inventory and now you have to share it. I went to my old church and I was going to ask the priest afterwards if he would do it at some point with me. I thought, I am not doing this. I am not doing this! In the church where I was an altar boy for six years. He said in the sermon stuff about Mary Magdalene and the stoning and it is about forgiveness and he was not guilty. I am really fortunate because next door we have the convent that we sold several years ago for people who are alcohol and drug addicted. Part of my job -- I want to get back to the community as I do the fifth steps -- I had not been in that church for five years or more and I don’t think I have been back since. Maybe once or twice. I went and talked to him and I did the fifth step with him. I was done and he goes, Alright Chuck, you’re human, thanks for sharing, have a nice day. Which is the definition of how you get rid of shame. I spent the time with the therapist and it was just really bizarre when you talk about things happening.

I also went to DVR and said, Hey, I want to do this. I did an orientation and he said, What do you want to do? I have no idea. He said, What have you done? I said, How long do you have? [laughs] Security, asbestos removal, cables, sales, advertising, marketing, drug dealing, taxi service. [laughs] They have a series of tests and they do a personality test, an interest inventory, a manual dexterity test, an IQ test, puzzle things. I rocked the puzzle things. The guy was like, That’s one of the fastest I’ve ever seen anyone do that. They send it off, compile the score, and tell you everything. I said, I’ve been making good decisions up until this point -- the twelve steps at this point. I’m letting go; letting God, let’s just see what the plan is.

I come in, Jeff Parkin was my counselor, he comes in and I go in and sit down. He says, Let’s look at your test results. He pulled out the file and said, Well, according to your skills your number one career that you’re best suited for is actor. We won’t pay for that. Tends not to have such a good success rate. [laughs] That was the first category. That was the number one. The next category was beauty salon operator, floral designer. I had no idea I was gay! [laughs] Stereotyping; don’t take that personally! I don’t feel that way, but what I thought at the time was, Great! I’m not a drug addict. I’ve got kids, how am I going to provide for them. In that same grouping was psychologist, counselor.

**AS**: Right. Someone that works with people.

**CH**: Someone that works with people. I thought, I’m already in on this whole drug addict thing. It was believed that most counselors at that point -- historically we know differently -- were people in recovery and that you needed to be in recovery to be effective. The whole idea that one addict helping another addict, which is very effective. I said, I’ll do the chemical dependence counseling thing. At that point it was a two-year program at Inver Hills [Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota]. I went and got signed up at Inver Hills, I took the tests, and I only scored a couple that were over the one hundred -- I had to take a few remedial math class, but other than that everything was over one hundred, which wasn’t bad considering eighteen to thirty-one I hadn’t had an education.

They said to take classes that you like so you can have some time to get used to college. Take a class that you like and that you think you’ll do well at. I took creative problem solving for one and I took a writing one because I have always had a flare and a knack for writing, and then I took a math class that was like introduction to algebra or something. For some reason I don’t have a mind that things algebraically. I’m not a linear sequential person. I think very geometrically and am more spatial. Those things just make sense to me. Algebra just doesn’t work.

My first day of my first class -- I am thirty-one years old -- this is January 3, 1996. I am all of ninety days sober at that point. I go in. You think a guy would be comfortable for all the things he has been through. I was totally insecure. I’m going to be the old guy in the community college school with the kids who couldn’t get into the good colleges go! That’s not true, but that’s what I’m thinking. I walk into class and there were only a couple of people in there. There were two that looked like they were nineteen or twenty, and there was a woman who looked to be about my age so I went and sat by her. I did and that was my introduction to college.

The college went really well. The woman that I sat next to is now my wife.

**AS**: Honestly? Oh my gosh. I had a feeling you were going to say that.

**CH**: It was the creative problem solving class and it worked really well for me. I took it because it was fun, it would be interesting, and I had a knack for it. My now wife took it because it fulfilled criteria in two core areas and therefore it would mean she would have to take one less class. That is about all you need to know about her and I to understand the nature of our relationship. She was actually going into marketing and advertising. I obviously had just come out of that among other things. She liked the books from the classes I was taking. She never considered social work.

I was going to school and decided I was going to -- because I have to have a plan -- I was going to get a two year degree, become a chemical dependency counselor while I finish my four year degree with a bachelors in social work. Did my master’s in social work so I could be an LICSW [licensed individual clinical social worker]. I had this eight-year plan lined up. She liked my classes so much and had never considered being a social worker that she flipped her classes. She was going to school because she had been laid off and had a package from her employer to go to school. She is an LICSW now, which I never got because I ended up in administration. She jokes because she says, You knew you would always have LICSW after your name, you just didn’t know it would say, Mrs. Charles Hilger, LICSW. [laughs]

**AS**: Did you finish your alcohol and drug --

**CH**: I did. I finished my two years and I did have a knack for it. It was daunting because the professor would be like, Oh you’re the -- it was unfair. I remember I was telling my therapist about it and she’s like, Oh, you’re the superstar? I don’t know what that means, but it stuck with me. I was taking these classes and getting As in these classes. I was thinking, These teachers are dumb because I can’t be this smart.

**AS**: Right. You are still in that mindset.

**CH**: Over time it bears out and I graduated after two years. I had taken a job as a tech in a halfway house overnight so I could study. I always give my wife a hard time because I say, I was thirty-one years old, three months sober, no driver’s license, no vehicle, living downstairs in my parents’ duplex with my dad driving me back and forth to school, with a job -- don’t take this the wrong way -- I was monitoring security alarms overnight and usually when we met, if your alarm goes off at your house I’m the one that calls the police. It was like for seven or eight bucks an hour. At thirty-one. Is that like a good social experiment, or what? I have no idea. Oh, this will be fun! Let’s see where this goes. I mean, what was she thinking. [laughs]

I finish my two years. She had taken a job at detox as a tech, I had taken a job at Cochlear Programs and they happen to be next to each other. I worked for a year as a tech while I was going to school. They hired me the day I graduated to start detox as a counselor. I worked at detox for six years, which was a great experience. I saw about a thousand patients a year. That’s a lot of patients over six years to assessments with. I continued and did my bachelor’s degree in social work. We moved in together in ‘97 and got married in 2002. We blended our families. She has a son that is the same age as mine. Our sons are just six months apart. They were fast friends at the age of seven when they met and they are still fast friends.

I was finishing up my bachelor’s at University of Wisconsin River Falls where Kinnic Falls campus is located. No irony left on me there. I still go back there every semester and talk to their class.

**AS**: Talk to which class?

**CH**: Use, abuse, and addiction. About harm reduction services. I went into working with opiate addiction. My wife and I worked side by side as counselors for about two of the years of detox after I became a counselor and she became a counselor. She did that for like two years and then we finished our BSW and she wanted to do something else. She went off and did a couple other things and ended up working in a methadone clinic at some point and said to me, This is great because you have patients for two years. If we are going to LICSWs this most looks like the therapeutic model where you have these patients engaged in mental health care and counseling for a long time. It’s a great training ground because you have the same fifty patients.

I applied to that company as well and I went to a different location than where she was at. I started working in 2003. I was a counselor for a year. The company was a national one and they didn’t have a lot of leadership or strength here. The treatment director resigned and I applied for the position. It was three counselors in the clinic -- it was a small clinic. I think there were 150 patients in the clinic at that time. I took over as the treatment director.

**AS**: Where is this?

**CH**: Dakota Metro.

**AS**: In the Twin Cities?

**CH**: Yeah, down in Burnsville.

**AS**: It is a methadone clinic?

**CH**: It is a methadone clinic owned by a management group. I don’t want to be disparaging towards them.

**AS**: What year is this?

**CH**: This is 2003. In 2004 I was a counselor. In 2004 I took over as the treatment director. I made a few changes and the clinic took off. I had to double the size of the clinic. We just did really well. I was fortunate enough to find a few really solid staff members, enough people that knew enough about the treatment modality that I didn’t know yet like the pharmacy and the nursing piece. I used the medical model because I worked in detox before.

I do have my license back by this point. [laughs] In the spring of ‘96 Brownie, my wife, gave me the money to pay to take my test and get my license back. She was tired of driving me around. My dad gave up the job he was like, You got it now!

The clinic took off and we did really well. I got a call from a friend of mine I knew from the state. I knew him from working at detox next door. He was like, Hey, just so you know another national company is sniffing around Minnesota looking to open clinics. I notified my boss and he notified the CEO and he called me and said, The only way to stop this is to open up more clinics and I want you to do a footprint, get you boots on the ground -- you know Minnesota better than anybody -- and tell me where to put three clinics. Give me three locations.

I worked that out and figured it out with my process and about a year after I became treatment director and I had put this proposal together and my regional director resigned. He was a man I have tremendous amount of respect for and is an amazing individual, great boss, one of the best people I have ever worked with. I was sorry to see him go. It was between me and another guy for the regional director because two of us applied for that position. I had kind of done that groundwork for the clinic. The CEO knew what I could do but the other guy applied and he had been there longer. In fact, he was the guy that hired me, and I got the job. He hired me as a counselor, then we were peers, and then I got hired. I found out he didn’t know how to run a clinic and I had to terminate him. Terminating the guy that hires you is not fun.

I opened up two methadone clinics for them here in the state. We never did open the third one.

**AS**: Was that Valhalla?

**CH**: No that would be St. Cloud Metro and Rochester Metro. For five years I had seven clinics in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Indiana. In that time, because it is a national company I got to work with Dr. Thomas Payte since the late sixties, you look at the tip forty-three, which has all the ‘this is how you do methadone.’ He is one of the authors. He is one of the top ten in the field. When they point to the elders he is one of them. He knew the people that pioneered methadone. Doctors Dole and Niswane. Just an amazing physician. He has a heart for patients and a realistic approach and view of methadone. I got to work under him for five years.

The company I was working for didn’t allow for things like additional care like mental health. I was working on my master’s degree for mental health so I really had a penchant for that. They thought it was a good idea but it wasn’t baked into their model. If you add in mental health you end up reducing your profit. They didn’t want to do that. It was their model.

**AS**: Because it was just maintenance?

**CH**: They had all the licensed drug and alcohol counselors, right. When you try to start bringing in higher cost therapists

**AS**: ...let’s treat that problem that you keep talking about. I see.

**CH**: The man I worked for was very difficult to work for. People are surprised that I worked for the five years that I did. Eventually we agreed to disagree on the topic of patient care and I elected to leave. I figured I was finishing my MSW and I needed my hours so I would go work at House of Charity in downtown Minneapolis for a person who used to be a treatment director. I work for her now. We always got along great. I was never one to be caught up on [1. 38.59]. Let’s just get the job done and do it right.

I started working at House of Charity, which is a group-housing unit with service for mental health, CD [chemical dependency] services, the whole nine yards. We were doing groups. Can’t do mental health yet, at that point, but I’m doing groups. I have all the methadone patients on the side because that’s what I do on the side. I am taking on consulting jobs so I’m doing some consulting for Valhalla, which is a relatively new MAT [medically assisted treatment] program at that point. My friend at House of Charity quit and they offered me the treatment director job. If I take the treatment director job I’m never going to get my hours for my LICSW.

I was just finishing my master’s at that point. I got to the point at St. Thomas [St. Paul, Minnesota] where I was finishing my master’s degree, it has a clinical focus, but I did the two-year program. I was in year five of the two year program when my advisor who I had never talked to before called me in and said, You will not be the first person to take my two year program and turn it into a six year program -- this was in March -- You have until the end of the semester to finish or we are going to wash you out and you cannot return. I had all the research, I had all the data, and it was just a matter of getting it written. I tend to be a bit of a perfectionist. I finished it.

I was consulting with Valhalla and when they found out I had this treatment director job they were like, We could use you here if you are interested in leaving that job. They were getting ready for their first accreditation. I told them I would work for them although I had a five-year noncompete with my other employer so I had to be a counselor, I couldn’t do anything else. I was a counselor that was writing policy procedures manual. And I had a [unclear]. At that point I was the eighth employee hired. My wife had left that other methadone treatment program and opened a locked CD treatment program for people that were committed down in Hastings and the Cochran Programs. She moved to Valhalla as a counselor. This was the third company we had worked for together, which works for us.

Valhalla was owned by a person that was on a methadone treatment program. The company that I used to work for -- I didn’t know him -- but he wasn’t happy with the way he was treated so he established Valhalla in a way that was a place that I would want to go to and I would want to be treated in terms of how counseling is handled, how insurance is handled, how medical services are handled. His idea was a much broader approach. My only piece when I went to Valhalla was, It is fine but we have to do mental health care. I won’t do this unless we do mental health, thinking at some point I might get my hours in. [laughs]

They agreed to that. I was the eighth employee. We had one hundred and fifty patients and that was October of 2009. Through a whole series of things like the increase in the opiate epidemic, someone who knew how to do marketing, the expansion of services into mental health. We took that clinic from one hundred and fifty to one thousand active patients in just three years, which means we are hiring a counselor every six weeks. It is crazy to think what we went through. We opened a second location in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, and transferred like one hundred and fifty patients because they were actually closer to that location, and the company was sold last June when we had about 2,300 patients in 2016.

We integrated mental health services so that patients coming in would get a mental health diagnostic assessment in addition to the regular counseling services. We had full time nurse practitioners and physician's assistants and doctors that are on site most of the day and most of the days. Just a whole different level of care. We had expanded Valhalla Place to add a medical clinic that you couldn’t do certain things from the treatment program to provide better and consistent medical care to patients with persisting issues besides do the physicals and the annual physicals. That was really huge. It has been amazing.

I never did go and get my hours. I actually never sat for the licensed social worker test that you sit after you’ve finished your master’s. In a short time in Valhalla I moved from counselor to treatment director to executive director. They tried to come after me for the noncompete, but it’s pretty difficult when that’s what a person does for a living; for their career. It would have been an uphill battle for them. It is a different model and I’m not using what I learned there. I’m using what I knew what I wanted to do and it fit with what the owners wanted.

**AS**: The pursuit of your interest in counseling led you to change the model in a methadone clinic setting that actually has improved patient outcomes? Was that a new model for Minnesota to have the mental health aspect integrated?

**CH**: There are other people that have done integrated mental health models. It really depends on the philosophy and the approach. Many of them are in larger mental health centers and medical centers. They are driven by a medical model. Instead of being patient centered it is really about, This is our program and this is what our physicians do. It is not guided by the patient and if the patient is or isn’t progressing through treatment. Is their quality of life stable? Are they looking for something better? Can we help them improve that if they want to? Is this as good as it gets and we need to be okay with that? A lot of the patients we have at Valhalla and a lot of the initial growth were patients that have been on a clinic tour for years because they would spend three years at a clinic, they wouldn’t get the results that the clinic expected, they would kick them out, they would go to the next clinic. Wanting to grow, people are always taking patients even though they know -- they think it’s going to be different or whatever.

With the mental health patient in tact we can take the more challenging patient and we can work with them. We don’t say that this is going to get that much better. You’ve been in four methadone programs in the last two years and it hasn’t gotten any better. You’ve been through eight inpatient treatments, three outpatient treatments, four group residential housing. Why do you think if we provide you with methadone it is going to be any different? We fight for stabilization. Let’s not expect more than what it is going to be.

There is a percentage of the population that just kept doing a clinic shuffle. Mental health issues kept getting in the way and they do fine for a while and then they have a manic episode and they go off and do something silly. They would sell their doses or whatever and then no one wants to deal with them. Just developing that and being able to do the medical care. Now the patient is more invested in the program that they know they can go to where they say methadone and they know the provider is not going to roll their eyes or say, I’m not going to prescribe you any pain medications.

**AS**: It is destigmatized.

**CH**: It is. It is completely destigmatized. People don’t tend to move away as much from our programs. When you look at our numbers ninety percent of patients that have been on the program for a year are free of any illicit opiate use.

**AS**: For one year?

**CH**: Not for one year. At one year. When you do the measurement, ninety percent are testing negative for any illicit substances. Seventy percent test free of any elicit substances. Between the seventy and the ninety mark is predominantly people who continue to use THC [tetrahydrocannabinol]. I’m not going to put someone out, but is this something that is interfering with your quality of life? Do you want to change it because it is illegal? You might get drug tested at your job? If those things aren’t an issue --

**AS**: You don’t kick them out of the program.

**CH**: No, I’m not going to kick them out of the program. Anyway, it is still ultimately their choice to make. The funder at some point may say, If you continue to stay positive you’re going to do -- we offer high intensity outpatient treatment, which is a twelve week program for five days a week, three hours at a time for twelve weeks for people that have more challenges making the changes they have to make. There is no reason to add the outpatient element. Some of them just want to go to in order to get the stability. The outpatient piece has been critical.

The counselors get more training than they ever did, but they still don’t have the depth of knowledge that licensed mental health professionals have. They are teaming up to work with this patient and figure out what needs to happen.

It has been a fascinating journey. The pieces that made the biggest difference were the things that weren’t supposed to -- certainly there is serendipity that has come into play with the church thing and a couple of other things, but the right place at the right time, everything happens for a reason, whatever you make peace with or you look at it. I was the person that was cornered in for treatment, which we all know never works. I thought that was kind of funny.

**AS**: It didn’t work right away.

**CH**: The *Road Less Travelled* was a book that I picked out for a guy that had been my roommate at the treatment center. We went down to the library and I picked it out for him and I said, You’ve got to read this because I think this is what you’re looking for. [laughs] He elected to leave the halfway house, so he left it on my desk. He said, Would you mind returning this? It is the only reason I read it. There are a number of those very crystallized moments where I’m like, That was weird. Getting into school, therapy was huge, the mental health piece, the treatment piece was huge. My twelve-step piece was critical as well. I did CA groups as well, cocaine anonymous groups, for two years at ADAP. I would still go back frequently probably for three years. Eventually I stopped going and haven’t been going for years.

Doing harm reduction strategies, we do syringe exchange, we distribution of Narcan and training for Narcan across the state. The numbers that were coming back for 2016 it looks like more than twenty-five percent of the kits that we distribute are being used to reverse overdoses. Huge numbers. We distributed over two thousand last year. Five hundred reversals out of those two thousand kits.

Watching people go through recovery over the years, people that I still see today that we on my original fifty case load in 2003 -- I always joke that you never forget your first fifty. I’ve certainly lost patients over the years. My belief in the dogmatic approach to recovery, you know the ‘once an addict always an addict’ just doesn’t apply. There are people that it is never safe for them to go back to using. Using anything, using something. People have different physiologies, they respond differently with chemicals.

I had a bad accident in 2000 and they sent me home after five days in the hospital. I had a broken collarbone, five broken ribs, and a punctured lung. They sent me home with Dilaudid, and all this stuff I had been listening to people saying were great drugs. I took them with a little bit of, I need to get rid of this pain, and a little bit of anticipation. I don’t get it. They don’t do anything for me. I am a go fast guy. Thank God they don’t treat those things with cocaine because it would have been a different story. [laughs] It would not have worked out too well. I believe that our mindset that because someone has problems at some point in their life with alcohol or drugs does not mean that they cannot ever use again. I would be irresponsible if I ran around saying that everybody should find out if it was just a phase. I would never do that. Several years ago I made the conscious decision that drinking at this point in my life would be okay for me. Two and a half years into it I consumed it socially, and I have never gotten any problems because of drinking.

**AS**: You still have your license.

**CH**: I still have my license. [laughs] My methadone piece when I do the eight hour MAT 101 and I kind of roll this out slowly in the presentation but I still have narcolepsy and at age thirty-five it started to get bad to the point where I was counseling in my first year at MAT and I was starting to have problems staying awake with patients, which doesn’t convey any positive regard. They were like, Chuck, come on. The good part is coming. Is your dose okay? Are you nodding? Do my pupils look small?

I went to the doctor because they told me it wouldn’t get any worse. He told me I was just getting older so the effects are more pronounced. Thanks. That’s getting worse. I don’t care how you sort it, that’s getting worse.

Despite the fact that based on the twelve-step philosophy that taking any stimulants -- because stimulants are my drug of choice -- is a slippery slope, then ultimately is going to lead back to regular use and or abuse or addiction, ultimately addiction and jails or those types of institutions, if not death, I elected that I did not want to sit at home and be on Social Security because I cannot drive my car because I cannot stay awake behind the wheel, which is what ultimately could have happened. I elected to take the risk and take stimulants. I am fifty-two and I have been on stimulants for -- I joke and say the only time I ever abused them was the morning I had four ibuprofen in one hand and four of my ten milligram Ritalins for the day. Instead of taking the four Ibuprofen I took the four Ritilin. That morning went by really fast. Other than that I have never abused it. I have never taken it in excess and it allows me to function. Here I am now, here I am a person taking a kissing cousin to my drug of choice. People abuse Ritilin; it is a stimulant. Stimulants are my drug of choice but I take them to maintain functioning so that I can do what I need to do. Without it I wouldn’t be able to do that and it would definitely have a negative impact on my quality of life. Yet, my patients that take methadone, and nobody ever questions whether I’m sober or not.

When I started drinking and I did tell a few of the guys that have been in long-term sobriety with me -- and I still consider myself in recovery and long term sobriety and recovery -- that I had made the decision, because I didn’t want to keep any secrets, we were talking about, Oh you’ve got so much time and I said, Well, I’m not counting alcohol anymore. They were like, What do you mean you aren’t counting alcohol? I was like, Well, six months ago I decided it wasn’t an issue for me. I’m not sober from alcohol anymore. They threw me out of the damn club because now I wasn’t really an addict. Now I’m not really a person in recovery because nobody can do that. Nobody could ever go through a phase in their life where they used alcohol or another drug as a maladaptive coping mechanism, and then at some point later in their life go back to use at a regular level. They would say, You were never an alcoholic anyway.

To go back to the methadone thing my patients taking the kissing cousin to their drug of choice in order to function on a daily basis -- it can be abused -- some of our patients do abuse that, they mix it with other medications, they do it in order to get an effect. The vast majority, eighty percent of the patients don’t do that and it works just fine. Fifteen years ago even to say that out loud it could put your whole career into jeopardy. I actually work it into the eight-hour medication assisted treatment --

**AS**: To say what out loud?

**CH**: To say that people could return to normal, social consumption drug of choice, perhaps without the same outcome or the same consequences.

**AS**: Even something like an opioid?

**CH**: Even something like an opioid. An opioid is just another drug. It affects a different area of the brain and it is a very primary area that is part of our reward circuitry for sure. It is part of our survival function; it ties into all those pieces. But, to say that a person, and certainly we have evidence of this, I don’t know if people that are going to go back and try to start using -- I’m not going to go back and start using cocaine recreationally. Alcohol fits more into the social strata.

**AS**: I’m thinking heroin. Some people are using it socially, at first, but then they get hooked.

**CH**: More people recover on their own from anything than they ever do by going to treatment.

**AS**: We just don’t know who those people are.

**CH**: At best, the studies that we have show a twenty percent success rate.

**AS**: For treatment?

**CH**: For treatment. When you try and say it is only successful twenty percent of the time people say, Is that their first or second time through? People really get it their second time through. There are people that should never use again. I have seen people that have one beer and they change. For whatever reason -- chemically it is a bad idea. I certainly have heard stories of people who have two beers and go to lockup. You shouldn’t drink ever. It’s not like that for me. I think we need more people out there that say people who go through midlife crises -- they lose their jobs, grief and loss issues, and they may choose to use alcohol or some other drug as a maladaptive coping mechanism. Ultimately more often than not they move away from it on their own without having to go to treatment. Second of all, if they ever use again it doesn’t mean you are going to be dead in six months.

With opiates compared to drinking you are dealing with a whole other level of unknowns. You’ve got carfentanyl, you’ve got fentanyl, you just don’t know. There’re so many variables. People die from alcohol related disorders every year; more people than are dying from opioids. It’s just quicker with opiates.

**AS**: Right, you die much faster.

**CH**: That’s an important piece to get out there. I don’t think we are doing anyone any favor with the war on drugs.

**AS**: That’s a whole other issue.

**CH**: I will point to Portugal and leave it at that. Their numbers are there. You can’t say it would be the same across cultures, but I think it would be pretty darn close. Statistically it would be in the ballpark.

**AS**: Thank you, Chuck.

**CH**: You didn’t ask any questions.

**AS**: I didn’t have to! That’s what’s good.

**CH**: It’s hard! This is going to be a twenty-hour story if I did all the twists and turns.

**AS**: We might need a part two that is just an hour. I might want to come back and talk about harm reduction and where you think this is going.

**CH**: That’s right! That’s how we started out and I completely disregarded that.

**AS**: I think it is really important because it helps me filter and think about how I am going to write. When I wrote the chapter about mothers I didn’t know what was really going to come up. There was this piece about them being embattled.

**CH**: I hope you wrote something about the crack babies. I’m still waiting to see something about the crack babies.

**AS**: They aren’t there!

**CH**: What do you mean they aren’t there? Sorry. [laughs]

**AS**: Someone else already wrote that: Susan Campbell. This idea of mothers being embattled and embattled motherhood and also being addicted to mothering in some way. So, themes come up. That’s why I enjoy hearing the whole story. Thank you so much.

**CH**: There are so many pieces.