**Brandon Coleman**

**Narrator**

**Amy Sullivan**

**Interviewer**

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**St. Paul, Minnesota**

Brandon Coleman -**BC**

Amy Sullivan -**AS**

Unidentified Student 1 -**US1**

Unidentified Student 2 -**US2**

**B:** ...I don’t know how long it was, but I remember spending a lot of time trying to hold my head up. My head just kept going like this. Later on, I found out I had gotten into some drugs that my mom had laying around. That was before I could see over the table. I remember being really low and being eye level with the handles of the cabinets. I also remember that at a very young age I learned that if you see one of those needle things on the ground you have to walk around it. You can’t step on one of those. I don’t remember if I ever did or not.

My mom is a meth addict. She didn’t want to grow up and be a mom right away. I don’t know if there was a catalyst to this happening, but I was sent to live with my grandmother. She is the only person in my family that never gave up on me. She always knew there was a good person inside of me. She raised me; I sat in her lap all the time. I guess I used to play with her ear a lot. I kind of remember that. That was just the kind of relationship me and my grandmother had. I called her ‘nanny,’ she was my nanny.

I stayed there for a while. She got me out of the situation I was in because nothing good would have come out of that at all. Except, I think it planted a seed in my head that that kind of shit was normal. The drugs, the bad behavior, and being afraid of adults. That was all normal. I stayed with my grandmother; a lot happened in between. I don’t think I developed a self. I don’t think I actually developed a person that I was. I don’t know how to explain it any better than that. It always felt like I had this empty hole there where, now that I think about it, it’s that warm feeling that people had for their parents and for being at home. I never had that. That was just an empty hole. It was filled up by my grandmother but I couldn’t always be around her.

My mother decided to somewhat get her shit together. My dad got into some big shootout in Laughlin, Nevada. I can’t remember how old I was, but I think it was around ‘88 or ‘89. My mom left my dad and hooked up with this Jewish guy with a hard core work ethic. He would provide for her. Being a little kid, I just wanted to be a little kid. I didn’t want to pay attention to if my mom was still doing that same stuff that she did that scared me. I remember having a fear that someone was going to put that white powder shit on my lip while I was asleep and I would breathe it in. That was a legitimate fear that I had. I don’t think any kid should have that kind of fear. I’m not trying to break your guys’ hearts or anything, but that was the reality of being an eight year old for me. Howard tried. He really tried to turn things around for me and my mom.

**AS**: Your stepdad?

**BC**: Yeah, my stepdad. He had a really weird, strange way about it. I was bad at this point in time. I couldn’t listen to what people told me to do. I wouldn’t do it. It wasn’t because didn’t want to. I don’t know why but I just could never follow rules at this time. I liked to be alone a lot at this time and I developed a passion for reading. I was reading big, thick novels about whatever when I was a youngster.

At this point in time I’m living in Denver [Colorado]. We moved from Denver to Arkansas and back to Denver, then to Texas, and then to Arizona. He worked for a chain of restaurants, but he worked for the corporation that owned the chain of restaurants. I think they owned Chili’s and all those mall-type restaurants. He moved us out to Arizona. When I got to Arizona I met another kid that was just like me. His dad was a big, mean, abusive alcoholic. We just had this kinship. We were just good friends. We came to be like brothers. Absolutely. My mom took him in, as much as she could. His mom took me in. Our addictions started together and flourished together.

My mom is the one who turned me onto meth. Right at the beginning of high school, maybe I was even in junior high at this point, I was having trouble with my homework; I just didn’t want to do it. She told me, “This will help you concentrate on your homework.” I don’t blame her. She still uses to this day. She has never had to face the consequences of her use because of her privileged place in society. She stands behind her rich, white male. He gives her a safe place to do everything in. I’m not sure if he knows that’s what she does, but I don’t understand how he couldn’t. Some days when I would go over and see my mom I’m just like Jesus, it’s bad. I always thought I was bad and that’s how I know I could do more drugs was I wasn’t as bad as my mom, you know.

I’m trying to make light of it. It’s just a serious thing in my life. This is the third or fourth time that I’ve told my story. By the end of it I can see people on the edge of their seats sometimes. It kind of makes me feel -- I just hope this is helping.

Me and Nick started shooting meth.

**AS**: How old were you?

**BC**: Fifteen. I skipped the whole pipe thing. I wanted to be high right away. I honestly don’t know how I made it so long. Two years straight of doing that. This is over countless broken relationships. I’m just giving a summary. Just think of everything that is possibly shitty that could happen and it happened to me. I don’t want to say it happened to me because I did it to myself. The whole time I saw exactly what was happening to me. I just didn’t care because I was so good at manipulation and so good at talking that I would just talk myself out of something.

When I was about seventeen -- it took me about two years of not sleeping to want to sleep. Another friend of mine said, “You can do some heroin and go to sleep.” Right away again, at seventeen, I didn’t smoke it; I dove in head first into that addiction along with my meth addiction. You can imagine what happens from there. This is ‘95. ‘97 I started shooting heroin.

In ‘98 it was my first offense and I went to prison for four years in Arizona. It’s not the kind of place you want to get locked up in. I probably would have taken any Minnesota prison over an Arizona prison any day. [laughs] I still wasn’t grown up yet. I still had to grow up; I’m talking like physically. Like knowing that it’s better just to keep your mouth shut; it’s just better to keep your eyes forward. I learned that pretty quickly when I went to prison. There were a lot of really traumatic experiences that happened in there. I’m not going to go into detail, but it was pretty bad. I got out and just went right back. I couldn’t seem to conform and it was just an easier way. I could inject a chemical in my blood and run around and not care about anything at all; knowing that life is building up and reality is going to come crashing in.

At this point in time I learned that you really could just pick a direction and go that way. I learned to sneak on trains and ride them to the next state. I would hop off and immerse myself into whatever drug culture they had wherever I got off. That’s where I really learned how to not give a shit and hide from myself. You call it traveling but I just call it running. That’s what it was. It sounds cool but there’s no word for how lonely I was. And how scary it was that I could just come to and be somewhere that I had never been before and not even realize how I had gotten there. I’m not talking about at some new house in St. Paul [Minnesota]. I’m talking about Bourbon Street in New Orleans and being on the street with people going through my pockets trying to take my stuff.

St. Louis [Missouri], man. I almost want to tell you the story about St. Louis. I really think I’m traumatized. I’ve tried to tell that story a couple of times -- yeah, I’m not going to tell that one. I just can’t.

I think it was 2006 when I tried to get clean. I had had enough. I had gotten jumped so many times. I had been beaten up and left for dead because I didn’t care who I ripped off. I didn’t care what they did to me when they found me. I would rip off the Mexican mafia and sleep on a guy’s couch. He would want that free bag of dope he would get if he called the guys I had ripped off and said, “Hey, he’s sleeping here on my couch right now. Come on over. But you’ve got to give me half a gram.” I would get woken up by being pistol whipped by crazy Mexican dudes speaking Spanish really loudly. That was the scariest thing. I thought I was going to die and I really didn’t care. My eyes were already swollen shut from a fight the day before. Once you get bloody and beaten to a certain point it doesn’t matter anymore. That’s where I was.

I don’t even remember who but somebody cared enough to stick me into detox and get me clean. I stayed clean for a little bit and I met this girl. We stayed together for a little bit and I had a boy, his name is Dorian and I had another little boy and his name was Deven. I was still using, but somehow I was providing for them. I wasn’t providing them a safe father to be around. I saw the exact same thing happening to these little boys that had happened to me. I saw it right in front of me but I couldn’t stop.

The one part I remember over everything -- you’ve heard this before -- there really isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t think about this. During that time I was doing a lot of speed balls, which is coke and heroin. For some reason, I liked how the shower sounded when the rush hit me. It was like a tunnel sound. I was at home with the boys and I just went into the bathroom and shut the door and did my thing. Before I knew it, this had never happened before, my eyes started going like this [shakes hands quickly] and the whole world started going. I remember laying back on the toilet and waking up. I go to go out of the bathroom and I can’t open the door. I pushed it open a little bit and looked out. Both of my boys had their pillows and blankets and they were sleeping outside the bathroom door waiting for their dad to come out. That is burned into my memory; that will never go away.

At that point, like I said, I didn’t care. I didn’t even see that while it was going on. My mom, the insane person that she is, decided that I wasn’t fit to have the boys. She takes them, I don’t know how she does it but she does it. That just gives me an out: my boys are safe and I’m hitting the road again. Just when I was getting my stuff ready to go, I hadn’t quite left yet, Nick, the guy I told you guys about -- we had this ritual. At the time I had a ‘63 Lincoln Continental and there was an eight track player in it. The only eight track we had was Al Green. On Fridays our dealer wouldn’t drive into Tempe [Arizona] to give us dope. We would have to drive out to Glendale [Arizona] to get it. There’s this freeway there called the Loop 202 that just goes around the whole valley. That car pretty much drives itself so I would put my arm over there and he would hit me up and then he would shoot himself up. We would just drive in circles listening to Al Green.

We played this game where whoever was driving, if the other person nodded off we would whack their heads against the window. It was just this stupid game that we played. He didn’t come to when I did it. I’ve only seen it in movies where people overdose and they have foam coming out of their mouth but that actually happened this time. No other time has that ever happened. I guess his heart exploded because the cocaine was really good and it made his heart explode. First, it brought him down -- it was just all wrong.

I was high too, really high. I missed the exit to the hospital three times trying to get him there. Finally, I got him there and I ran around to his side of the car, but for some reason his door wouldn’t open. It had never happened before. So, I ran back to my side, drug him over the seat, and put him in a wheelchair and wheeled him into the emergency room. I ran back outside, grabbed my keys, started the car, and drove around the block. I stashed the dope and everything in the bushes, turned around, and came back. When I came back the cops were there. They put handcuffs on me and told me I was going to jail for, I don’t remember what he called it, but it was accessory to something.

It still hadn’t dawned on me what had happened. We had both overdosed tons of times, but this time got him. The cops told me, “He’s dead. You’re going to have to call his mom.” I called his mom. It still hadn’t really hit me until I was cleaning out his apartment. His mom called and she said, “I can’t do it. I need you to go over there and do it.” That’s when it really hit me. After that it just seemed like my mom was blaming me for it, my baby’s mom was blaming me for it, his mom was blaming me for it, and I was blaming myself for it. I just left town and I stayed gone. I can’t even tell you all the places I went that time. I was just drifting, floating.

My friend Matt, a kid that I grew up with, got a hold of my mom and said, “Have you heard from Brandon?” She said, “No, but when I do can I get him on an airplane and send him to Minneapolis? Or else he’s going to die.” That’s pretty much what happened.

**AS**: Was Matt here?

**BC**: Matt was here. He had an uncle or something that lived in Isanti, Minnesota. He came here to get clean. He got cleaner; he wasn’t shoving needles in his arm every day until I showed up in Minnesota to get clean. I think part of his motivation to get me here was because he’s not the kind of guy that can just go out into a city and find dope. I just have that resource, or something. I can just find it wherever that it.

I came out here and learned what Rule 25 is. Rule 25 is the first step. I don’t know what about me made people want to help me. I was really more interested in what people had in their pockets that I could get. That’s really what I’m more interested in at this point. I was the worst kind of person. I hated myself. I couldn’t even pinpoint when I started hating myself. As long as I can remember there was just something that I didn’t like when I looked in the mirror. When I was a kid I always lied about myself. I didn’t want people to know who I really was. If I saw somebody that I thought was cool I would take some of their story and take that on. I was ashamed of what I had: my mom, my dad.

I came here and did a Rule 25. I went to this place called Dellwood [Recovery Center, Cambridge, Minnesota]. They were like, “Well, you can’t get clean on your own. You’re going to have to do Suboxone.” I was like, “Okay, I’ll do whatever it is.” This was when Suboxone was pretty new because I didn’t really know about it.

**AS**: When was this?

**BC**: 2012. Suboxone didn’t work. What it did was give me a way to make money. At this time you could get twenty to forty dollars for a little pill. I got one hundred and twenty a month. That became the hustle. I didn’t have to go out and rob and steal. All I had to do was sell my Suboxone. Then I found dealers that would take the Suboxone and give me anything for it.

I still lived out of my backpack. I slept by the river, slept in squats, slept wherever I could if I slept. I went to treatment again. I went to the Pride Institute [Minneapolis, Minnesota]. That’s where I met Maddie. We actually stayed clean together for five months. Then head first, right away. We hit the road again and she had a habit of overdosing. She overdosed so much. Luckily in Minnesota, Valhalla has it, [Valhalla Place, Brooklyn Park, Minnesota] you can get a little bottle of Narcan. You don’t have to hit a vein you can just go for it right in the shoulder if somebody is overdosing and it will bring them right back in five minutes.

Over and over again this is how it would happen. She wouldn’t overdose for a couple of months and then she would overdose. I overdosed a couple of times between there. I think what really made my decision was I had watched everyone around me die: the kids I grew up with, people I considered my brother, people I knew. I didn’t die. I stayed alive through gutters and shit and everything; I stayed alive. I didn’t want for her to die and me to still be alive. I just knew that was what was going to happen. I love Maddie so much. I was to the point of leaving: “I’m just going to disappear and you’re never going to see me again. I am going to go to treatment and I hope you are going to go to treatment.”

I actually went to treatment and wanted to get clean. Twenty years of being homeless, not knowing what home feels like. Just the looks I had gotten for twenty years. I’m lucky to even look the way I do after twenty years of this. I don’t have the greatest self esteem in the world but I don’t have shitty self esteem anymore.

I don’t know what it was. I was lucky to have a spiritual awakening; not everybody does. I was awake for it. It happens every day, all day; it’s just whether people choose to see it for what it is. Every day something like that happens for me just to let me know that I’m doing the right thing. If you guys had seen my daughter -- that right there just overwhelms me with that feeling that I never had my whole life. Now my little boys come here on breaks and stay with me and I have an extra room to provide them a room. I have fucked those little boys out of something that I have given to my daughter. My daughter has never had to know me the way I was. I have been an excellent father to my daughter and she will never know anything different. It rips my guts apart to know that my boys could have had that had I just woken up a little bit sooner.

I try not to keep myself in that thought but all I can do now is go from here. I wake up every morning and I don’t stick a needle in my arm, I don’t fuck people over, I don’t lie to people. When I look at a person now I smile at them no matter who it is. All these different things that I always wanted to tell myself that I was I actually am now. I’m actually happy and I actually care about things. I care about myself and I want to help people. I know that it is an uphill battle but all I can do is the next right thing. That’s how I live my life: from one right choice to the next. If I lose sight of that in an instant it will strip me right back to where I was. I think that’s about the skinny of it.

That’s the best way I can do it. I make amends to people that I have hurt in the past. That’s really hard to do.

**AS**: You’re using the twelve steps?

**BC**: Yeah, I’m using the twelve steps. For me personally I don’t see any other way. If I don’t make my whole life about it in one way or another.

My body does this thing where it will try to convince me that I can control it [my addiction]. My body actually tries to fuck me over. My head actually tries to convince me that I’m so uncomfortable that I need to get high. I know it will make me feel better, but you just have to do the harder thing which is to not do it. I just have to not do it one time. I just have to stay clean for today; right now. I’m not worrying about tomorrow until tomorrow. That’s the only way that I can do it and I have tried every way possible. Because I have lived as long as I have -- that’s why I’m clean. Twenty years of misery is enough.

**AS**: And that you survived through all of that.

**BC**: I survived. I did. I can still articulate sentences. [laughs]

**AS**: You can still read, you are about to finish your GED [General Education Development], and you have a full-time job.

**BC**: I can still read. I can do all kinds of stuff. I’m actually doing the kinds of stuff that I should have learned to do in life already. Now I do it and I’m really nervous about it. A lot of the stuff I’m doing today people learn to do when they are eighteen years old. I’m thirty-six. Just now I’m starting to live my life. I’ve done everything and been everywhere and none of it means anything because I wasn’t really there. I was just a husk of a person until I decided to look around and saw that there is life around me and I can participate in it in a positive way.

I try to sit there and think -- I don’t know if this is just the way my mind is -- but there’s no way, looking at my daughter, that there is any way I can do the things I did when I was around my sons around her. The way that I am now it just isn’t possible. I can’t fathom it. That’s a big shift. That’s a huge shift. Never would I have thought that I wasn’t a piece of shit.

**AS**: There is a lot of really judgmental language about how stupid meth heads are. We were talking about how it comes from people in communities that have been particularly ravaged by meth. As a class, we’ve struggled with all the stigma. We think, Why does everyone write about it this way, perpetuating these myths about addicts? How can we change this whole problem if we still think about people as bad and morally bankrupt? It goes along with all these vivid descriptions of what meth does to your body, that it makes you do crazy things. Do you think that these portrayals are honest? Do you think that they are fair? Because you just talked about yourself in a lot of derogatory terms.

**BC**: Yeah, and there’s no way to even get the way that I felt across to you guys.

**AS**: Do the stereotypes have a use?

**BC**: Yeah, they do. It is what it is. It doesn’t deserve to be fluffed. It doesn’t deserve to be --

**AS**: What doesn’t?

**BC**: Meth. The way some people act. I think that when people do crazy shit when they’re on meth they have a dual diagnosis. They might have prior mental conditions and then they put meth on top of it. Schizophrenia does two things that I’ve seen happen directly in front of me. Some Schizophrenics, when they get completely high, their voices get completely quiet and they don’t hear anything and they can concentrate. Some Schizophrenics it’s the opposite. The way that this guy described it to me was that his personalities took on different personalities. He had gotten used to his mind the way it was. A lot of it is preconditioned. It depends on the way they are before they start doing it.

**US1**: You talk a little bit about the personal stigma that you’ve faced and how people have looked down on you, or look at you a certain way. Do you feel like people still look at you and behave at you the same way? If so, how do you deal with that based just on the way that you look?

**BC**: When they do it now, it’s interesting to me now. It’s funny at first I would think, “I know what that guy thinks of me. If he only knew.” That’s my ego kicking in, though: “You’re so much better than that now, and he just needs to know that.” It just depends on the day. Now, I can be sad about it. At the same time I deserve that. I have twenty years to make up for. I do it in whatever way I can. There is this lady that cleans the apartments that I paint sometimes and she has a hell of a time getting around to all these places so I get her bus cards and give them to her. Just little things like that that I do to try to make up for the things I’ve done.

There’s no way to make up for all the shit that I’ve done to this world; this negative imprint that I’ve left on people’s lives that I don’t even realize. I just try to be of service as much as I can. That’s how I deal with the stigma. I make it a priority to go just a little bit further for a person even if I don’t know them. Especially if I don’t know them because nobody expects a person that looks like me to do it and be smiling the whole time. [laughs] That’s the only way that I can make it okay with myself and think that I am trying to fix the wreckage.

There’s stuff that I’ve done that I can’t even fix but it wouldn’t even be healthy to try to fix because it would do way more damage. That’s like the amends. We try to make amends to people wherever possible except when that would do harm to them or others.

I really try to think about things more now. I’m more quiet; my voice isn’t as loud as it was. My head doesn’t get held up as high.

**US2**: Earlier you said Minnesota was probably the best place to get treatment. Why is Minnesota different than other states? How do other states do it?

**BC**: It’s their resources.

**AS**: Hazelden [Betty Ford Foundation, St. Paul, Minnesota], Willmar [Minnesota]. It was the beginning of the recovery scene.

**BC**: I’ve been on the streets in a lot of the states. I’ve hit a bottom in every state and tried to reach for help there. Never have I found it except for in Minnesota. Minnesota really picked my ass up and dusted me off. It is still helping me. I’m help-able I guess; I try.

I hope I enlightened you guys. Next time will be easier than this time. [laughs]

There are some days when I think the cravings are going to get me. The meth cravings -- heroin not so much -- but the meth cravings are out of this world. They have my hands sweating sometimes. Maybe even a song will trigger it. Any time I go into a public bathroom I get them because of being on the streets. That’s where you have to use when you’re on the streets.

I’m just a survivor I guess; I’m just one of those people that can survive.