**Michael O’Neill**

**Narrator**

**Amy Sullivan**

**Interviewer**

**January 19, 2017**

**Home of Amy Sullivan**

**Minneapolis, Minnesota**

Michael O’Neill **-MO**

Amy Sullivan **-AS**

Zachary Mallet **-ZM**

**MO:** Insurance companies know this. Why are we spending thirty grand a month for something that could be costing us seven thousand a month if the outcomes are the same? Hazelden you can't even get a cup of tea, everything is so bare bones right now. Every budget is slashed right now. I wish them well.

**AS:** First thing I need you to do is state your name and that you give me permission to record this interview.

**MO:** This is Michael O'Neill it is January 19th. I give Amy Sullivan permission to record this interview.

**AS:** We're sitting in my home, 1942 Irving Avenue South. Also present is Zachary Mallet. Did I say it right?

**ZM:** Mallet.

**AS:** Sorry. Mike we know each other and so I'm going to do my best to not presume in our conversation. You can tell me things you've already told me before. In my questions I'll make sure I do my best to make it clear for the purposes of this recording. What I do with parents is I start with their own childhood and their early adulthood and some of their early parenting experiences. I basically want you to tell me a condensed version of your life, keeping in mind where addiction or other issues you can kind of see.

**MO:** I was born in Ohio in 1963. My dad knew that Youngstown, Ohio was not going to have a future for his very large family. I was the twelfth child born to Catholic parents. My dad just had the foresight to see there wasn't going to be a future there for his family so he took a big risk and moved to Southern California which not many people were doing at the time. A lot of people were doing it but most people were like, "Who wants to go live in that god awful desert? There're no trees." I moved out there. Honestly growing up in Orange County in the 1960s and 70s was dreamy. I say I grew up in sunshine. I remember lolling around on the floor in sunny windows. I had two very functional parents. I went to a good Catholic school which was a good experience. It was also a tough experience. I learned a lot about shaming. I learned about control that I didn't like. I grew up with lots of brothers and sisters that I got along with well and loved dearly and did lots of things with. I had lots of friends. I just had tons of friends ever since kindergarten. Life was pretty good. It was good to be me. I got to spend my summers at the beach and it was easy. I never saw anything but pretty much middle class function. There were a few kids that went to my school that definitely had more challenges than I did. I wasn't that tuned in on it. There were kids that didn't want you to come over to their house.

I started to notice as I got older, I have lots of older brothers and sisters up to twenty years older than me. They were long gone by then. Some of them were moving out at sixteen because of all the kids in the house. That my house was a refuge for a lot of my older brothers and sisters, they had friends that they were with all the time and they spent a lot of time at our house. I didn't understand. Some of these women were like other sisters to me they were around so much. They kind of helped care for me. I didn't know that they came from really tough houses and our house was a haven. My mom was a gracious, giving, loving person. They didn't have that. The holidays there were anywhere from forty to seventy people in our house at the holidays. So many of them were these older teenagers who basically home wasn't a good place. My mom had gifts for them and she'd cook for them and she would talk to them. She would counsel them like a healthy adult would which they didn't have access to. I started to become more aware of that later on and I actually really admired that. That people looked up to my family and that, "You're so lucky" and stuff.

There was definitely a culture of drugs and alcohol in my family. My dad drank but not a lot. He would drink nightly when he got home from work but he would drink a little bit and have dinner. He'd have a drink, he'd have dinner, he would maybe have another drink after dinner maybe not, then he would read the paper and go to bed. He ran his own business. My mom was a little bit of wine on a Friday night, that was about it. Older brothers and sisters drank a lot. Some of them did, some of them didn't at all. Some of them couldn't finish a beer if they had to in a night. Others couldn't have less than ten beers. I definitely at a young age started to see drunks in my house. Either my brothers and sisters’ friends, this is the 1960s, early 70s, lots of marijuana, lots of alcohol and no doubt other stuff that was going on that I wasn't keen on or aware of at the time. I became very attracted to it when I was in junior high school. I knew it was a matter of time before I was going to enter that arena. Sneaking a drink here or there at a wedding was one thing. At my thirteenth birthday I smoked pot for the first time with my sister. I couldn't wait for it, just couldn't wait. It was just kind of dark and mysterious and lovely and away I went.

Probably the most regrettable choice of my life was using drugs and drinking alcohol when I was a teenager. I used excessively in high school. I smoked pot pretty much on a daily basis all throughout high school. I drank pretty much every weekend, definitely to excess. I got kicked out of high school. Easily one of the smartest kids, just natural ability, things were easy for me. I could test out with “As” on everything but couldn't finish assignments, I couldn't stay in class. I just was bored out of my mind. I really wasted a lot of really good opportunities because I was way more interested in partying. I got into the business world.

**AS:** No college?

**MO:** Just a little bit of junior college. That's it. I liked it but I had to go make money. It took a lot of extended focus. Paying attention was always a challenge for me. Off I went into the business world. All I can say is I was lucky. I got into cocaine way too much in my early twenties. I never stole or anything like that but spent too much of my own money and lied a lot about it. I didn't like that I was always having to justify. I didn't like that. My friends and I were always lying all the time about our lives. "It was free tonight."

**AS:** You were lying about how much money you were spending.

**MO:** You were stealing from yourself is what you were doing.

**AS:** You would have to justify it to other people.

**MO:** "This one was free tonight because I did this deal for this guy and I helped him find some other people." You just knew everybody was lying and you knew you were lying and I didn't like that. Cocaine was a problem. The real problem was the alcohol that went with the cocaine because of the high, the amphetamine high and then to neutralize. I've had hangovers for like three days before from cocaine binges and the alcohol. I could feel my kidneys just aching. In my mid-twenties, maybe it was my frontal cortex came along, I was twenty-three and I had a horrible experience with cocaine one weekend and I just stopped cold turkey. I just said, "I'm done with that." I knew enough to stay away from the people that I used with. Pretty soon I was used to not doing it and I was okay. I still drank alcohol but not...It was just weird. My brain was changing and I was just less interested in partying like that, I just was. I was lucky because a lot of the people I grew up with are dead, are locked up, are institutionalized or basically still live at their parents’ house in their fifties. Their lives never changed. I love those guys dearly but I just knew I couldn't be around them. I got lucky.

**AS:** When you say the business world what were you doing?

**MO:** I was doing promotional marketing. I was going around the country and anytime a big company was going to introduce a product to the market there was a giant assault on Peoria or whatever. Coupons, and bill boards, and newspaper fliers, and coupons, and ads on TV. We would show up with the samplers in supermarkets. Sampling yogurt, or bacon, or paper towels, or Nestle Quick, in thousands and thousands of stores across the entire Midwest. It was fun.

**AS:** They would fly you here?

**MO:** They'd fly me there and I'd be in a market for anywhere from two weeks to six weeks at a time. Four weeks in El Paso, Texas was the longest summer of my life. It was good. I learned a lot. I got into that business. I got into HR and I was doing training. Part of it I really liked. I liked the development, people development. Part of it I didn't like because mostly I had bosses who were just crappy. They just weren't very good leaders at all. Some of them were really smart about business but that didn't really matter. The ones that I did like were few and far between. I was kind of interested in that.

I had a big triggering event for me. I hired a young woman who was really terrific, just fantastic. I was so proud to have her come join our team. The day she was supposed to show up she didn't show up and I was pretty pissed. I made a bunch of phone calls. The next day I found out she was hit head on and was killed the week before. She was pacing herself to see how long it would take her to get to our office. She was hit. She was a newlywed. I was devastated, just devastated. I didn't even really know exactly what was going on but I was bereft.

Not long after that I went to the food marketing show in Chicago and I went and saw some improve theater and I thought, "God that was awesome." Somebody in the group who I didn't even know, I had just met them said, "You know what? You'd probably be good at this. You should move to Chicago." I'm like, "I can't do that. I'm going to be a vice president." I think a week later I gave a two weeks notice and I moved to Chicago and went and studied improv theater for three and a half years. Best move I ever made in my entire life. I moved to a big city, learned a lot about me, learned a lot about society, getting on stage doing improvisation and you will find out who you are. It will tap into all of your darkest fears. Seriously. It will tear at you and you will find out how much you spend time in your head and how much you were trying to protect an image. It's an amazing equalizer. I got to watch some ridiculous talent in Chicago at the time. Amy Poehler was one of my classmates.

**AS:** Were you at Second City?

**MO:** Yes, I was a student at Second City. Steve Carrell was one of my teachers. I used to watch Stephen Colbert on a pretty much nightly basis. He was a remarkable talent, not entirely brilliant but he was just so brave. I'd just watch a person fail, and fail, and fail, and fail and then take off like a bird. That's a rare thing. Tina Fey was just about a year behind me in the classes. It was an awesome group of talented people that it was great to be around, thrilling to be around. Artistic people and people who really gave a damn, social activism that I didn't grow up around in the very white Orange County, California.

I met my former wife in Chicago. We got married and knew we weren't going to stay in Chicago because we'd end up out in the 'burbs and we didn't want to. We moved back to Minnesota where she is from and I really liked Minnesota. In '97 we had a son. My son Devon was born. It was just everything I've always wanted. I've grown up around tons of children, nieces and nephews, and I've always enjoyed children but I knew I wasn't a very mature young adult. I didn't want to get married or have kids when I was young. Here I was at thirty-four and I had my first child. He was just delightful. He was just a lovely little guy. I was just madly in love with him, we did so much stuff together.

His mom was way more into labelling. "He's a spirited child." He's just a kid you know. He got along with everybody. Every kid liked Devon. He just followed along. All through school every review of teachers was, "I wish I had ten Devons in every class." That being said, it's like, I wish he would say more. He plays very safe. he doesn't say much. He's compliant. He's a nice person. There's no problems with him ever, at all. He seems to hang around the good kids. They seemed to guide him. He was kind of a follower. Attention deficit like me, no doubt about it. No hyperactivity at all. He had a really hard time paying attention to just about anything. He grew up in Montessori which is very self-directed. He would find the path of least resistance constantly. "Can we just go do nothing? Awesome."

**AS:** Again today?

**MO:** They would reel him in on that. His sister Anna was two and a half years younger than him. They were super tight. They did everything together. They were just in each other's shadows. She adored him. She wore his hand-me-down Buzz Lightyear shoes and underwear and she said, "I'm not a gore." Girl. "I'm not a gore. I'm a boy. It's not a ja-jina, it's a peen." I was like, okay I've got a trans daughter or a son or whatever. Your choice, kid that's cool Those two were very tight. She was very self-directed. She was her own little boss. She just knew what she wanted and she thrived in Montessori. Devon didn't.

Devon's mom, Anna's mom, Amy is her name, Amy and I are definitely two different people. Whether times were good or bad it was kind of a constant stress between us. It was hard being married. We really like each other, in fact we loved each other very much but it just wasn't going to sustain. We were just wired so entirely differently. In 2010 we separated and got back for a short amount of time but it just wasn't going to work. I moved to Denver, Colorado to separate ourselves. I knew divorce was just impending and I just wanted to get away from...I just had to go heal up for a while and get away from all this. I was traumatized, not that I wasn't going to be married anymore—that was actually kind of a relief. Not that she's a bad person, but it was toxic that we were together. Just traumatized that I wasn't going to be under the same roof as my kids. That was horrid. That I wasn't going to be there with them and have dinner with them and make them breakfast. That was terrifying to me. Probably the biggest trauma I'd had in my life up until that point. They were just too young. I knew I wasn't going to make their lives more toxic by having them tolerate parents who didn't get along.

**AS:** How old were they at that point?

**MO:** Devon was thirteen, Anna was ten. I was in Denver, Devon just started eighth grade at the public school and his mom called me and said, “Hey are you sitting down?” I said, “I am as a matter of fact, I’m in my car. What’s going on?” “Devon’s been kicked out of school.” “Okay. What happened?” “He was selling pot from the bus.” Day one. Day one of eighth grade he had marijuana and he sold some marijuana to somebody on the bus and of course thirteen year olds leak the story. Maybe was he fourteen by then? Doesn’t matter. He got kicked out of school. They interrogated him, it was not okay the way they interrogated him. It was sort of no amnesty at all, you’re out.

**AS:** No tolerance. This was a public school?

**MO:** It was a public school. He went back to the Montessori school for eighth grade which he was miserable about. It’s like, “You know what? You are totally in charge of this having happened.” We tried as much as we could to talk about, and we got divorced that fall, to talk about divorce and having talked to counselors. He was pretty surly, pretty pissed off. He was a pissed off eighth grader. “I don’t care about the divorce. It doesn’t matter. It’s okay. It’s okay.” I figured it was a problem but he just said, “It’s okay. It’s okay. Just shut up. Leave me alone.”

He got through eighth grade and was starting to hang out with some older guys who just were not very positive elements at all. He’s always been a follower. Groups of guys hanging out wanting to cause trouble want to find followers. They always want to build their pack. They were just kind of lost souls, if you will. He was probably smoking cigarettes with them. At the time, I find out later that’s when he started to actually eat OxyContin. He was eating Oxis, occasionally. They started out free of course. Smoking pot here and there but for the most part we didn’t find, he never came home drunk, we didn’t find and paraphernalia on him. We thought we were, because both his mother and I had had experience with youth drinking alcohol and using drugs that we’d for sure know. I think he knew enough that we were savvy so he was pretty discreet about his use. As far as we know no heavy use in eighth grade.

Freshman year was pretty much just disastrous, just barely enough, path of least resistance just enough to get by. He swam, he was a swimmer. Sophomore year same thing, just barely enough to get by. Interestingly enough a counselor at school, this is telling because it kind of shows up later, a counselor at his school happens to get a hold of Devon’s academics and it wasn’t his counselor, it was a different counselor. I don’t know how this happened or who this guy was but he was an angel if you ask me. He said, “Hey come into my office. You’re actually a smart kid. Based on what I can see here you’re smart enough to be an AP student next year.” He did because his best friend is really academic, scholarly young man. Devon says he didn’t know what that was. “You know what? You can be an AP student next year if you turn this around the rest of this year. What do you want to do about that?” It’s interesting all of his life we’d been saying, “You can do better. You’re smarter than this.” It’s just like Charlie Brown’s teacher, “Wamp, wamp, wamp.” A stranger happened to see something that he thought was promising and all of a sudden it kind of took hold and Devon worked hard that second half of his sophomore year. He got into AP classes his junior year.

**AS:** Was he in a public school by this point?

**MO:** He’s in public school. He’s in Chaska High School which at the time was huge, it hadn’t split yet. It was an enormous high school. It had lots of wealthy Chanhassen kids, farm kids from Carver County, lots of Latino kids from down by the river. It was a pretty diverse mix of a very very large high school where you can get lost. You can hide out in a big school like that. His junior year he was taking AP classes. He had to hang out with kids who were good AP students. He had to follow them and learn how to study and learn how to do homework and learn how to prep. He struggled mightily with all the courses, especially the AP courses but he was passing them. His junior year his swimming was great. By springtime he was really fit and I’m like, “Yay! We raised a good kid.” We were kind of cocky about it, I was.

**AS:** Are you back here at this point or are you still in Denver?

**MO:** I’m living in Chaska with my fiancée Priscilla. She was living with me in Chaska. That junior year Cilla and I got married up at Lake Superior. Devon was there with his sister and Cilla’s two grown children. Cilla’s two grown children and my son smoked pot that weekend up at that rented house we were at. No big deal, seriously not a giant big deal that teenagers smoke a little pot. In the spring his mom found him smoking dope in the house and we confiscated some buds from him. Then all of a sudden it was interesting he started to get pretty surly. A very gentle, compliant, nice young man was all of the sudden showing a nasty side of him. It was uncomfortable but it was also like he was expressing himself. He kind of wanted to create his own space and keep what was his. Basically he blamed us. “There was no problem until you caught me. Everything was fine.” And it was. “It was a really good springtime until you caught me. So I’m not the problem, you’re the problem.” Oh okay. We started to sporadically test him and he was testing negative with urine analysis.

That summer he was working at a restaurant and he really liked it. They really liked him and he was making money and he was making friends at work. His high school buddies and he was hanging out with some older kids and meeting customers. The diner busboy and waiter and cook and all kind of aprons at that place. It was a pretty good summer overall. There were a couple things we were starting to just notice a change. He was becoming more of an adult for one thing. There was a bit of a darkness that was starting to show up. It got my attention and it got his mom’s attention. Sometimes it was him being sort of a brooding seventeen-year-old and other times it was weird, there was a transformation going on there. I had a brand new marriage.

We rented a beach house in California in August and the morning that we were to go I found Devon spaced out in the kitchen, no in the basement, gaming at six in the morning or five in the morning. We had to get on a plane pretty soon. He was tripping really hard. We didn’t know what was going on and we didn’t know if we were going to be able to get him on a plane or not. Ultimately we found out what he did was he ate a bunch of Ambien and then if you stay awake, if you don’t fall asleep it tries to put you to sleep but if you can stay awake through that it’s like a Quaalude, you don’t fall asleep you trip. He was tripping and he doesn’t even know how much he took. It was not a good sign at all, that he was experimenting. The internet had loads of methodologies out there. He started his senior year at Normandale [Community College]. He was a PSEO student, is that what they call it?

**AS:** Yes.

**MO:** He was going to start to chop away some college credits. Things almost immediately got dark. Things started to really get bizarre. He had his own car so he was commuting to school. It was a lot of mysterious behavior. Lots of, “I need to bring something to my math teacher at nine o’clock at night.” Really? If he says he does, he does right? His mom just got married. So she was in a brand new marriage. I was in a new marriage. Amy calls and says, “Hey are you sitting down?” “No. Tell me what’s going on.” “Devon’s been fired from his job.” “What’s going on?” “He stole five hundred dollars cash, taken it out of the till.”

**AS:** From the restaurant?

**MO:** From the restaurant. We called the guy who fired him. Devon was devastated. He was just demoralized. He was just dropping into a hole having been caught doing this. It was interesting, the guy said, “Hey I don’t know what’s going on with him but six months ago he was our best employee and everyone loved him. Customers, employees, bosses. Couldn’t pick a better guy. Six months later he’s the fucking worst. We were ready to fire him anyway. He’s just awful. This is a firable charge. We could actually press charges but we’re not going to because I suspect there’s something definitely wrong with your son and you should check what’s going on.” As soon as I got off the phone I called my wife who was at work and I said, “Do you have cash here at the home?” She did, she had several hundred dollars stashed to give to her sons for birthdays and stuff. That money was gone. We started to find close to a thousand bucks had already been…He just said it was cigarettes and gas money which was bullshit. It wasn’t.

My wife works at a family practice clinic. A physician in her clinic, Dr. Levy, is an addiction specialist. She was telling him about these patterns and he said that was really telling. He asked her, “Does this guy Devon have any felonies.” She said, “No, I don’t think so. No.” He said, “I assure you he’s engaged in felony behavior. I assure you.” I called Amy and told her that, Devon’s mom, we started to circle the wagons around a…we didn’t know he was a heroin addict. He’s a poly-user but he had started to go from eating, snorting, smoking Oxi to snorting and smoking heroin and finding out it’s cheaper and much more effective to shoot it. He was shooting dope. He was dealing. He was dealing club drugs. The entire southwest metro my son was the dealer. He was the big connect for all the schools down there which was very demoralizing to me.

Things came to a head. We really started to circle things up pretty tight on him. He was very vicious. It was very dark because we were cutting off his…when you cut off an addict’s supply it’s like you’re cutting off his air. He was getting incredibly mean and really dark. Turns out he was terrified of the heroin but he couldn’t quit. He tried to quit on his own. He was going through horrible withdrawals and then he would go and score again. It got to a point where he forged a check, drove to Minneapolis to go score, he went to go just by a couple of premade syringes to kill himself. He was going to kill himself with heroin that night. He gave a couple guys a hundred bucks and those angels flew away, they just took his money and said, “We’re not going to get him anything. We’re just going to take the money for ourselves.” They didn’t give him anything. He ended up overdosing on DXM which is just over-the-counter cough medicine. That’s all he could get. He was so desperate which isn’t lethal. It could kill you if you took enough. Basically it put him into Hennepin County Medical Center, he was in the emergency department for overnight and then spent four days in the ICU. We were just devastated that our son was as sick as he was.

**AS:** He had done cough syrup but he was also in withdrawal.

**MO:** Oh yeah.

**AS:** So he was in opioid withdrawal.

**MO:** He was in opioid withdrawal and then took all this over-the-counter DXM which really messes with your blood pressure. He was in Hennepin County Medical Center and circling the drain but mostly terrified, mostly so scared, very very sad.

**AS:** When was this Mike?

**MO:** This was November of 2015. We got him into Hazelden. He did the outpatient. You’re under the illusion that twenty-eight days sleep is going to shine him up and take some of the dents out and he’s coming home. He was just clean, that’s really all he was. He was surly. The Twelve Step didn’t mean anything. Instantly right off the bat he was saying, “I’m just going to go back to smoking pot and drinking because that was fine. That’s not a problem. I’m just not going to do heroin anymore.” “You can’t do that now.” “I can. I’ll be fine. Just leave me alone.”

Happened to find out that this was where the anger really started to come up, he was dealing directly with gangs in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Russians and Latin Boys. He had carried a series of weapons, one, two, three pistols including a cop killer, including a forty-five with cop killer rounds. Those rounds would go right through a vest. Found out that he’s been shot at, found out that he has shot at people. He was hanging out with the gang and he threw a pistol out the window. He fired some rounds at boys who were in a neighborhood, in a neighborhood! He robbed a person at gunpoint. He robbed a couple people on the street at gunpoint.

**AS:** When did you find all this out?

**MO:** Just found out about all that from debriefing and Hazelden. He was still a minor so we had access to his interview records and stuff.

**AS:** He was seventeen?

**MO:** He was seventeen. He was seventeen doing horrid felonies at great risk to kill himself and kill other people. That’s when my rage really came up. I was just unbelievably distraught that my gentle son who basically had to quit football in seventh grade because he couldn’t hit a guy—it wasn’t him. That’s why he switched to swimming. He’s just such a gentle soul and here he is doing very dangerous drugs and making life very risky for other people. I was just really distraught.

Along the way I knew and I remember hearing something at Hazelden at the family program about find a family program. Find a NarAnon or an AlAnon therapy group. I knew enough about recovery because two of my brothers, two of my oldest brothers, had been in recovery at that time for almost fifty years in AA. I had lost a sister, one of my sisters. This year will be ten years. Dead from alcoholism. Zero treatment just drank herself to death. I knew that I needed help because I was in so much torment between sadness, anger, sitting on top enormous fear, a brand new marriage, a daughter the good kid, the proverbial good kid, who was getting ignored, the stress between Devon’s mother and I. She found an AlAnon meeting and I found a NarAnon meeting. Learning almost immediately, one of my friends came up to me, one of the dads, and said, “This is going to unfold for a very long time.” Which was stunning to me, it hurt because I knew he was telling the truth because his own child had been in addiction for a number of years. I started to get better at accepting the brutal reality. Having people say things like, “Hey the good news is he’s young. It sounds like you caught it early, that’s great.” The challenge is he’s young. They think can outsmart this brutal disease, their healthy, their bodies are fairly healthy and they can bounce back from drug trauma. You’re kind of like, you know it’s tough.

One of my friends told me the anger that I had about the terrible violent violations that were going on, “Use that energy when you go to set boundaries. Don’t bring the energy to the meeting but bring that energy like here’s why it’s important that we set these boundaries.” So I started to find out very quickly that this wasn’t a problem that was going to get solved, very quickly. Nobody was there to tell me what to do. I just showed up and kind of just shut up and listened, feel safe and having a safe place to tell your story and what it’s like to feel like this in learning from other people who have been doing this awhile that there are ways to navigate this. This was really important to find out. I wanted to fix it and it wasn’t going to get fixed.

Having another dad walk up to me and telling me that relapse is predictable in young addicts, it’s extremely predictable. Most addicts do relapse after treatment number one, especially young addicts. You have an opportunity to prepare for what you’re going to say, how you’re going to stand, your tone, everything. What he said was, “Don’t do what I did.” He blasted his son when he relapsed and he made it worse. Just other things I learned along the way was, for me, again everything I learned there I just stole shamelessly from other people what they said. Not the first time I heard it, a lot of times it took a couple times to hear it.

**AS:** It’s not stealing.

**MO:** It’s borrowing shamelessly. Shameless borrowing.

**AS:** That’s the whole point.

**MO:** Exactly. I’d hear something ten times and on the eleventh time it would crystallize. Of course you plan and you go deal with this, the enemy always gets to vote. You would start to learn very quickly that you have to learn how to be resilient and not go off. One of the things I noticed when I was interacting with this addict and he was now sober but he was not in recovery. I was more scared of me than him. I was so awful in how I would interact with him and he wasn’t doing what I expected.

**AS:** Can you back up a little bit and talk about how you approached fathering. We don’t say fathering very often but how you approached it and then what his addiction changed in you and how that rage kind of manifested? I don’t have the sense that you were an overbearing and unreasonably demanding father. If you could just talk about what kind of a father were you? Where did that rage come from?

**MO:** Mostly I’m a pretty gentle soul. I’m a bleeding heart. I like to have lots of experience but I don’t like to ruffle things too much, maybe. Some people would say I’m very much a ruffler. I kind of say what’s on my mind. Living in Chicago changed my heart, changed my mind about the way I saw the world. Life wasn’t lily white Orange County; it was challenging, it was troubling, it was a lot of people. I had enormous exposure to the gay community and to Jewish people and people from all ethnicities. It started to really change the way I saw the world and how I wanted to be in the world and of course how I wanted to influence my children. I had no belief that I was going to affect how they saw the world. They’re going to choose it for themselves. I grew up with pretty conservative parents who probably, my dad definitely wanted me to be like him which never worked for me.

With my children I definitely had a very experiential, way way way less about stuff and way more about experiences. Kind of like the Canadian model or the European model. I’d rather that they do things than have things. I was definitely outspoken politically, talk about how it’s not okay to not treat people okay. We grew up in very white, my children grew up in very white Carver County and Chaska. Extremely Christian, extremely white, extremely conservative. I likened us to being blue eggs in a very red nest. There weren’t a lot of us out there. I would challenge some of the norms out there in thinking. My children saw the city a lot. We went in to the city a lot. Including walking around and seeing things like homeless people and people who were acting completely bizarre on the street. I was like, “I’m not there to judge those people. That’s a person who has problems. That’s a person who needs help. That can happen to anybody.” I didn’t want to shelter them from the way the world is or the way the world was.

I really wanted them to see the world and not have to go to a Minnesota school and marry somebody just like you and live in a neighborhood like this. God forbid you would do that. The reason I liked living out here was there was just a lot of open space. That was the experiential part. I couldn’t care less about the neighborhood but I loved the trails and the open space and just lots of nature and water and cool places to be with my kids. For the most part I’d try to be as conversational as possible, not too punitive. Time outs, there were times when those freaking spaced out little kids needed a time out more for me or for their mom than for them.

**AS:** That’s what I used to say.

**MO:** They grew up in Montessori. If you turn their room into a cell they’re not going to like going into their room. If you get punished in your room you’re not going to have a lot of joy in your room. I grew up in parochial school where you were basically told you were a filthy, awful sinner and you weren’t to be trusted so good luck. Montessori was like, “Why don’t we give them one hundred percent trust? Trust them one hundred percent at the beginning and then they get to demonstrate whether they can keep the trust. To the extent that they violate it we reel them in. There’s a consequence for violating the trust but we start to give them opportunities to reel the slack back.” Some parents out there in Carver County were like, “No way!” I’m like, “Yes way. That’s exactly how I think you should treat people, trust them. Trust them and if they don’t present that they’re trustworthy then you have to keep them close, then they have to start to show up differently. I want them to learn that early on.” That was really my methodology.

I spoke very openly, before my son and daughter were even ten we were talking about drugs and alcohol. I talked about the disease in my family. I talked about my own experience and I talked about my own regrets. I knew enough about brain science that their little brains, if they can get through their teen years without experimenting, especially any sort of heavy use the likelihood of addiction drops dramatically. Addiction is a really tough illness. I said, “Your Aunt Eileen is dead now. Those people downtown, they started early. I started early and I wish I wouldn’t have.” I was really transparent about my own use. I probably sounded like Charlie Brown’s teacher to my son as he started to get older. “I’ll be fine. I’m just going to experiment. I’ll be fine.” I was angry about that, that he went as far as he did even though I told them about it. Somehow that made it a pact.

My wife now, Cilla, she’s like, “That doesn’t mean shit coming from a parent.” It really doesn’t. A teacher would have way more impact, a physician could have way more impact than your actual parent. You mean well, you intend well that doesn’t mean you have influence over their lives. You have an enormous amount but the stuff you really want to have it’s so hollow. Right? “You could do better; you could do better.” Then some counselor comes in and says, “You could do better” and all of a sudden he did better. It had nothing to do with me at all. Kind of humbling. How am I doing with that?

**AS:** Can you describe a moment where you felt like you were kind of out of your body with your anger? I feel like there’s a point for a parent where we just can’t take in what’s actually happening and how we respond to that I think says a lot about addiction.

**MO:** The combination of the violence and the potential violence and the weapons and dealing. I knew there were probably parents who would gladly, if they could have, they would have shot my son right in the head. If they would have known that he was the one who got drugs into their little kid’s hand they would have shot him right in the head. Part of me couldn’t argue with that as a parent. That was the stuff that really like, “I thought you knew better. We’re gentle people. We move away from fights.” I didn’t watch football. I grew up watching football but it got to a point where I’m like, “This is so stupid. This is just such a stupid waste of time.” Fairly passive people.

For him to engage in stuff with such ease it seems like, there was a lot of identity stuff that went on for him. Where he wasn’t a star athlete or a star scholar. In his interviews he said, “Basically I became one of those drug people who get things for you.” That was a power, there was an identity that he really relished that he was seen as the guy to go to. That was the value that he brought. At that age it makes sense. I’m not going to argue with his logic. It made sense for him to do what he did because it gave him an identity that he couldn’t achieve through other methods. Really just absolutely inside out challenged that he could have done that. I was at the point, I’ve said this a lot and I’ll say it again, you get to the point where I would choose to have him die than to kill somebody. I choose to have him die than to harm somebody irreparably. Than to have those parents standing in my driveway threatening me or screaming at me because my son drunk or high either ODed with somebody or he drove over them drunk. I got to that point. I felt horrible feeling that and saying that.

It was interesting having other parents go, “Oh yeah. Totally identify with that. I don’t like it but I totally identify that feeling where your own child you’d be better off if they were dead and not harming.” I started to really wrestle with that kind of stuff. That identity of I’m the dad, he’s my child. When I went through divorce, identity is powerful stuff. My wife, my house, my children. I really struggled with it through addiction that one of my fellow parents is like, “She’s an adult I birthed a long time ago. I try not to refer to her as my daughter, as my kid anymore because it’s too hard.”

**AS:** Who? Your daughter?

**MO:** No this was one of our friends of NarAnon. That I have to start to separate from this parental thought that this is a little kid that needs me. That will pin you and put you into such great sadness and such confusion. I remember what it’s like, my parents, I don’t need you to do those things anymore. I did actually. I didn’t think I did. It was important that I started to establish some of my own space. When he was sober, he was sober ninety days at Hazelden not for twenty-eight. Almost ninety days and then off to sober living. He was just sober; he wasn’t in any kind of recovery at all. Sober’s tough and it’s so dangerous. The way I liken it is you’re just standing on the edge. You can step off, one bad thing can happen and you can step off or your close to the edge and ultimately there’s prelapse. You don’t just relapse. Generally, people it’s planned. They just walk over to the edge and they just wait for the trigger to happen or that moment or that safe space and they’re going to use again. Sober definitely wasn’t, I knew it was dangerous.

He had no idea what recovery was and no interest in going through the vulnerability of sitting in meetings and telling the truth. Basically it’s you’re going to strip naked in front of everybody and you’re going to do some spins and some yoga in front of them. Seriously, I’m sure he thought, “If that was an option I would have done that instead, naked yoga in front of everybody rather that telling the truth that I’m a fucked up person. I’m confused, I’m sad, I’m angry, I want to kill myself, I want to be a better person.” That’s really hard especially for a fairly stoic seventeen-year-old who’s got a lot of image to protect. Part of me got it and part of me was so frustrated that he was doing nothing about it but he was sober. He had a sober summer back at his mom’s house, his mom’s house and my house. He worked temp work and he was sober and we had him pee in a cup. He got into Step Up at Augsburg, the sober college program at Augsburg which is renowned. They have administrators come from all over the country and actually from overseas to say, “What are you doing and how are you doing it because we’re interested in creating something similar at our university.”

I’m going to go back in time for a second. Christmas, I think he was about three and a half years old, budgets and I don’t want my kids to have a lot of stuff I want them to get things that are necessary and fun but let’s have experience. I’d rather go sledding on Christmas than sit around opening gifts. Amy’s parents are well to do and he’s their first grandchild and they can do whatever the hell they want. So they brought over a barrel of gifts. He was excited about these gifts under the tree and then Christmas Eve there’s an enormous amount of gifts and they’re all his to go through. I’m sitting there probably having a beer, watching my son open gifts. He would rip open the gift and then get the box open, we’d maybe have to cut a little bit of tape, we’d open up and he’d look at what it was with these wild eyes and then it’d fade and he would just throw it to the side and he’d go to the next one. It was the same every time, wild eyed, ripping things open. “What is it?” He’d see it and then it would just fade and he’d go to the next one. I just sat there thinking, “Oh fuck. I’ve seen guys smoking crack cocaine and it’s the exact same body language.”

**AS:** You thought that when he was three and a half?

**MO:** Yes. It hit me like a bolt. I talked to his mom about it later, “He was just excited.” “I know he was excited.” I didn’t really dwell on it but I never forgot that. That what I saw was exactly what I’ve seen people smoking crack cocaine do. It’s never enough and they just keep going. It was chilling. I went, “Oh my gosh. He’s got the chip.”

**AS:** So he’s at Step Up.

**MO:** He’s at Step Up and we’re at orientation and there was a student panel that got up there. It was great. One kid’s like, “Hey. Ten schools I think I dropped out of. Pretty much I was planning where I was going to do suicide and how was I going to get it done because I’m an addict and every time I go to college there’s just drugs and alcohol everywhere and I’m a fuck up. I found this school and I’m like ‘Okay whatever I’m desperate. I don’t care anymore.’ I got to Step Up.” He has a 3.9 now, engineering. He’s like, “I love my life. I love my smart brain. I love recovery. This is so awesome.” Everybody is just like, “Yes! My kid’s going here.”

**AS:** They found their poster child.

**MO:** Yes. Another student got up there and said, “So people will want to know what do we do when we’re not students? Most students when they’re not students they are partyers. Here’s what we do we go bowling, we go clean graffiti off walls, nasty graffiti not the art stuff, we go read to the Somali kids. They read English to the Somali kids and they read English back to us. We do yoga, we go to the gym, we go to meetings, we scoop food, we bring coats to homeless people.   
We’ve got so many things you can do and we do it in groups. I’m like, “Yes! Great!”

Then this young lady said, “So here’s what happens every year. There are going to be some of the students who are like, ‘This is so stupid.’ They’re not in to recovery. They’re not into service work. They’re not into helping people. They’re just very selfish and miserable. They’re going to try to recruit and find other people who think this is stupid.” Amy, Devon’s mom and I, look at each other like…Sure enough that’s who he hung out with. He was smoking cigarettes and hanging out under the bridge with kids who just were sober Step Up students. It wasn’t in our control. I’d learned enough at this point. There’s nothing I could do about that but hope he’s doing okay. Pretty soon his grades started to get dodgy. There were some gaps in some of his stories.

**AS:** This is just the first semester?

**MO:** First semester. He started in September in October one of his best buddies that he hung out with, this kid relapsed on a Monday night. He went and used on a Monday night. He got kicked out of Step Up but was still an Augsburg student. On Wednesday another one of these Step Up students used with that kid who just relapsed. Now that kid’s been kicked out of Step Up. Then we called Devon or sent him a text that said, “Stay the fuck away from Michael. Stay away from him. He is so dangerous right now.” “I’m fine. I’m fine. It’s cool. No problem, no problem.” On Friday night Devon used with Michael. They used synthetic Xanax from China. Just lab pills that they bought online. The kid that he was with, Michael, he flat lined at Hennepin County Medical Center. He overdosed. Devon only took a half of dose but had a pretty bad night. He prelapsed and then he relapsed and he was kicked out of Step Up.

**AS:** Did Michael live?

**MO:** Michael lived and just basically went—he’s still an Augsburg student. Just back to school, just living in the dorms, “I’m fine.” He’d been through a lot of trauma in his life. His mother died when he was young and his dad’s a high powered downtown workaholic attorney. Michael was just kind of a problem. Devon was now commuting from his mom’s house and my house and enormous stress as he is now a college student at Augsburg. Academics were just falling apart all around him.

Then he disappeared on a Wednesday night in October. No, no in November. It was early November. He disappeared and he went off and we found out through phone records that he sold his laptop, sold his speakers, bought a pizza and stayed in a hotel in Wisconsin. We figured he was probably on his way to Chicago. We didn’t know what he was doing but he went to Chicago and binged heavily with hundreds of dollars in his pocket. Crack cocaine and that synthetic Xanax stuff.

**AS:** He tried that again?

**MO:** Yes, you have no idea. The chemist who made it probably doesn’t even know what’s in it. It’s so unspecific and so deadly. He was on Vivitrol so we knew he probably wasn’t taking opiates because it’d be worthless. He just did a huge amount of drugs for several days and came home, limped home after four days. I’ll be honest with you. We’ve never gone through this before, my son’s never been homeless, he’s never gone off on these disappearing acts, he’s never overdosed on opiates as far as we know, as far as he knows. He never lost his breathing. We’re really lucky. We had very very few like the long traumas so many of the parents have been through. We were lucky. He’s a very dangerous user. He went and used excessively. Enough that he could have killed himself or killed somebody else. You’re driving around just…

**AS:** Was he in touch with you during these four days? What were you doing?

**MO:** Just waiting, contacting all of his friends. I went through his phone records and contacting everybody like, “I’m sorry. I don’t know what to tell you. I’m sorry.” It’s like, “If I hear from him I’ll tell him that his parents love him and want him to come home.” He started to pop up some messaging on Facebook popped up. Like on Saturday morning, “I just needed some time to myself.” He came limping home and went to detox at The Mission out in Plymouth.

In those days that he was gone I remember getting dressed in the morning, I remember looking in the mirror and going, “Wow. Are these the clothes I’m going to have on when I go to the morgue? Am I going to have to identify his body wearing these clothes right now?” Just a random thought. It was a very poignant thought. His mom’s not going to identify his body. I’ll do that. That’s not his mom’s job that’s my job. Or am I going to see him in a county jail somewhere or am I going to see him in the press? Is a horrible thing going to happen? Are these the clothes I’m going to wear when I’m going to be with him.

Saturday he fortunately limped back. No money and I said, “Devon how are you?” He said, “I’m chill.” It just hit me like right in the spine, the fury in me that he was chill after what we went through for several days. I had to leave. “See that’s the fucking problem. Dad doesn’t know how to talk.” I just went out to the car because I wasn’t going to sit in there because I was going to say horrible things and I had nothing to say if all you are is chill when I went to give you a hug. I get that he was so addled at that point that he’d done a crap load of drugs, way more than we thought. We just thought that he smoked crack but he’d done a huge amount of drugs. It was go time. It was like something has to happen now, what are we going to do?

We started looking at options. Hazelden, we weren’t interested in going back to a center that was very good about education and comfy and stuff. I thought the middle of the Yukon was a good idea at that point. I did. Let’s go put him in a harsh fucking place, have him struggle. The Retreat was an option. Then we happen to find out that treatment in California was an option. California is different. There’s just some wrangling out there if you’re covered by insurance and then you can actually end up in sober living covered by insurance if you’re doing outpatient. It’s not totally legal, it’s not totally straight up but they bend the rules. We’re like, “We’re okay for bending the rules. Any means necessary.” I had a conversation with him, not a lot, we didn’t have a lot of contact because he was just so apathetic. I had to set a boundary. “Until you can identify or demonstrate active recovery I don’t want you at or around or near my house.” I wanted to get into lots of details about what active recovery looks like but I don’t know what it looks like because I’m not an addict. That’s all I had to say. If he starts to use again he’s going to start to hang out with dangerous people again. I don’t want him anywhere near my house or my wife or my dogs or my daughter. His mom didn’t set that same boundary and that was her choice.

That’s what I said to him. My hope was maybe he’ll want to go find out what active recovery looks like. He went to treatment in California. It was pretty scary. He was actually presenting schizophrenic hallucinations, schizophrenic presentation. Active hallucination not only voices and sounds and light but visual. He was seeing things. They said, “He’s just so toxic still.” He already detoxed but all the shit in that Chinese stuff is a mess. We don’t know a lot. They did a good job with him. I didn’t like them but they did a good job with him.

**AS:** The treatment center?

**MO:** Yes, they really work on the co-occurring condition stuff. They really get into, “Who the fuck are you? What’s your story? Who do you think you are? What do you want to do with this stuff? How do you want to turn out?” They really get into digging in and cornering you. It’s not gentle like Hazelden. It’s pretty fierce. Just from what we heard, he actually expressed in a moment of clarity, “I want to be a dad. I want to see the world. I want to go to school. I want to have a successful life.” Then he said, “I’m terrified I’m never going to have that stuff.” They said to him, “Well if you use the way you use you won’t. We see thousands of people and you won’t. If you use the way you use, you’ll put your brain into a state where you won’t have any of that stuff. That’s not a threat. We see it a lot. Pay attention.” He got bounced out of there and went into sober living just about a year ago.

Right here it’s the middle of January and he been in recovery ever since. He found a sponsor. He had kind of a bullshit sponsor, just a path of least resistance sponsor. Somebody probably said to him, “Dude that’s not a sponsor, get a real sponsor.” He had the guts to go up and find a sponsor who had what he wanted and basically the sponsor told him what a lot of good sponsors tell a lot of good people in recovery. “Shut up and do what I do. Don’t think. You’re thinking got you into this place so stop thinking and do what I do. You’re going to copy everything I do. You’re going to call me. I’m not going to call you. I’m not going to put up with any bullshit. You’re either in recovery or you’re not in recovery. If you’re in, you’re in. If you’re not, you’re not. I’ll figure you out very quickly.” This is a veteran.

**AS:** A war veteran or a recovery veteran?

**MO:** No, this guy’s been in recovery a long time. Devon was doing old school AA Los Angeles Hollywood recovery. NA is interesting it’s got a lot of war stories. People go to NA and they tell lots of the drug war stories. Young people thrive on it but it doesn’t help. You go to a meeting and listen to people tell war stories all night. It was so bad. AA is more about recovery, old boys. People who’ve been through shit and lost everything.

**AS:** I’ve heard people call them old timers.

**MO:** Old timers, lots of veterans, the old guard. Devon found an old guard. I don’t know if the guy is twenty-eight or sixty-eight. It’s none of my business. I think his mom met him last night in Los Angeles which is really huge.

**AS:** Amy’s in Los Angeles.

**MO:** He got into recovery and he worked for a sober living company and he’s doing remarkably well. I’d say he’s healthier now, he hasn’t been this healthy since he was twelve. He’s a different person altogether. He’s healthy, he’s well. I’m wildly grateful and also very realistic. He’s only nineteen and a half. Long term recovery starts after five years. You’re a toddler, you’re not a toddler until five years, you’re just crawling around. It’s very humbling. This sponsor, remember I said that counselor in high school told him the things I told him and it made sense to him. The things that sponsor is saying are things I’ve probably said or could say or would say but it doesn’t mean shit coming from me. His recovery has nothing to do with me and I’m okay with that. It’s not my business at all. My recovery is my business and what he does and chooses and who he hangs out with is his choice. Right now I’m just a lucky guy.

**AS:** Could you talk just a little bit about what you mean by your recovery? When did you realize that you had something that you had to recover from?

**MO:** I said I got into NarAnon while he was in his first month in treatment. This was not unfamiliar. I had actually been to AA meetings with one of my brothers years ago. I was stunned at the stuff I heard. Those were real people. His mom was familiar with recovery and a lot of people in recovery. I was like okay I guess I’ll go to this thing. I thought it was going to be miserable. I really thought I was going to walk in with a bunch of people on…they were hugging people and sharing baked goods and talking about, “Yes! She got arrested last night. Yay!” Everyone’s all excited about someone getting arrested on a felony. I’m like, “Who are these people?”

I started to realize that there were these healthy people who had it way worse than I did. I didn’t know they had it worse. My son was in trouble but these were people who’d been dealing with this for a long time and they weren’t miserable. They were scared, they were very challenged, they lost sleep at night but they were getting back to their lives. I see things in pictures, I always see everything in pictures. That’s kind of the way I see the world and the way I try to communicate the way I see things. It’s like you go to the edge of the forest and you have this little tiny machete on your skinny little arms and you think you’re going to chop through this thing to figure out how to fix this thing and you’re just not going to. You don’t have enough energy and it’s just too thick, it’s too brutal. There are elephants who know the trails. You just got to go get behind the elephants like my son has been told, “Get behind me.” I just kind of learned to get behind other elephants. Mostly moms, not a lot of dads in recovery unfortunately but mostly moms who kind of know the path because other people had created it. Who knows where the path was initially created and it doesn’t matter. There’s a path. There’s not one path, there’s lots of paths but I kind of stopped trying to chop my way through this thing and started hanging out with people who knew a lot more than I did.

I started to find out I had a lot of stuff to work on. My son didn’t bring my sadness, my rage, my terror to me it was always there. It just got uncorked. I had to own that. Own your shit as they say. Everything I was feeling was mine. I’d get challenged and sometimes I’d actively challenge in a meeting when somebody blames that other person for the things they’re experiencing. I try to do it gently but that’s your stuff. That’s your stuff. I guarantee there are addicts who get well and then there are family members and parents who don’t get well and go bat shit crazy. The addict’s like, “I’m doing okay now. What happened to you?” One of the best things you can do, as I learned and borrow shamelessly, is just work on your own recovery. The best way you can support them in your recovery is to be working on your own recovery so you don’t go off like that person that terrifies me. That furious, raging, spitting, angry Irishman. It’s the Wizard of Oz, behind that is this terrified person back here behind the curtain. Work on that guy because it’s not just going to be my son’s addiction where these things happen. It’s going to happen in traffic, it’s going to happen with my in-laws, with my wife, with colleagues and clients, and somebody that I bump into on the trail. I could actually be better at a lot of stuff. It really has nothing to do with my son’s addiction. Nothing. That’s incidental.

Sometimes I feel okay. It’s interesting, I’ve missed only two meetings in only two years. Last week I’ve been sick otherwise if I have work, something else planned or booked I go. I just try to show up there for humility and inspiration, which I get every single—I got a lot of humility last night. This is just what I noticed is every time I go to a meeting if I’m paying attention I will hear things I’ve never heard before. I might because I went in the right way I’m going to think things I’ve never thought before which in turn will lead me to possibly do things I’ve never done before, possibly. That doesn’t mean I just get it and go. I don’t. A lot of the stuff just goes in one ear and out the other. “Well that’s really interesting.” But I don’t use it. Sometimes it actually penetrates and I go and do something with it. It doesn’t work exactly the way I thought it would but it works in a way that I can learn from it. That’s why I go. All these different experiences along the way.

It’s just a lake. It’s the lake I go to so I don’t feel so horrible, so worthless and I don't blame myself. When you're by yourself it's like man the best of me does not come out. By myself with my dogs on the lake I'm actually in a pretty good place. Sitting by myself in a chair looking out a window, pulling at my skin, my best thoughts are a long way off. It's my worst thoughts, my shadows like I've got this I'll take over right now. It just kind of spills. There's so many people that just do that and that's the heartbreaking thing for me. I want to try to change that to get more people off of their butt. They have every right to sit by them self but they also have an opportunity to go hang out with people and heal and learn.

An addict alone, you're in dangerous company as they say. Same with a parent, same with a spouse, same with a brother, same with a daughter. When you're sitting alone you're not helping yourself. The only way things have been figured out since the dawn of time has been community, people sitting in circles and talking about what's real. White people brought clipboards and said, "We'll call this therapy." The brown people are like, "We've been doing this shit for thousands of years with no methodology other than sit in a circle and tell the truth." I'm just a big fan of it. I really am.

**AS:** Can you talk about what you're planning, when you're just talking about wanting to help other parents. Can you talk about what your thoughts are about what you want to be doing in the next few years?

**MO:** I'm working on a plan right now with a colleague, a fellow parent of an addict who just lost her son, right before Christmas. I'm actually heading over there right after this meeting to go talk a little bit about this stuff. Ultimately what we want to do is help, we want to facilitate and accelerate the process for people to learn that there's a lot of work they can do to help themselves. There's three "Cs" that they talk about in addiction. You didn't cause it, this is interesting for the addict to know and certainly for the family members. I didn't cause it. I cannot control it and I will not cure it. There's a fourth "C" that I really gravitate toward. It's really important and it's controversial, some people don't like it, but there is something called contribution. I can contribute the way I show up, there's no neutral, I'm adding to the mix. I'm either helping to improve things by working on my own recovery and learning not to engage where I don't need to engage or I'm exacerbating things by bringing my rage. By trying to control I'm adding, I'm contributing, I'm exacerbating the injury.

**AS:** The contribution can be positive or negative?

**MO:** Contribution is neutral but you're always contributing. Are you aware of how you're contributing?

**AS:** Which is different from the other three?

**MO:** Yes, absolutely. I've heard parents say, "I'm going to bring them home and we're just going to love him up. We're going to cook his favorite meals and we're going to watch *﻿Home Alone*﻿and I'm going to buy him some socks." The addict's like "Okay. Fine with me. I'll just sell those fucking socks." Or, "We're going to punish you. We're just going to make it really difficult for you to do anything." Okay. Bring on the shame.

I have an idea that we can help more people if we can get in front of audiences and just help them understand that there is a different experience if you're willing to lean in just like an addict has to lean in to their recovery. You can lean in and go find a healthy group. There's nothing we can say or do that will change anything for them. We just want to try to invite people to find a community where they can sit and have this stuff happen that just happens. I'll be damned if anyone can say exactly how it happens. I don't know. I don't know if it's realistic or not. I'd like to make a living out of it. I don't know if there's a living to be made out of it. I do know that I have enough resources and energy and skills to be able to impart to some people who are terrified that it doesn't have to keep feeling this way.

I don't mean just going to Anon because Anon's not healthy. You can have a different experience, you can protect your marriage, you can protect your finances, you can protect your spiritual life, you can protect your other relationships with other family members. All of that stuff, every bit of that can go away if you're not paying attention. While you're trying to rescue somebody who doesn't want to be rescued. You'll go right over the falls with them and you don't have to. You can get out. Say, "I'm going to climb down. If you're down there on the side of the river I'm going to come down and help you if I can but I'm not going over the falls with you. Those are those pictures I sent right?

It just breaks my heart that there are people sitting alone. Either afraid to share because they think they're going to get judged, they might. They may have some family members or community that they're at risk in. The dads, I'd love to get more dads to show up because they spend a lot of time very angry, deep in their grief because they can't fix something. That's a big problem. Then you got new problems. All of a sudden your family's feeling something that really has nothing to do with the addiction anymore. It's all my own beast, my shadow has shown up and everything else in my life has become a mess. If I can help people learn how to turn down their noise, help them learn how to do it them self. I can't do it for them. I have no experience, I just have an experience learning how to turn down my own noise and be like, "This is nice. I can still hear it."

**AS:** But it doesn't overtake your life.

**MO:** It doesn't overtake my life. I'm only here once. What else? Anything else?

**AS:** Do you have anything else?

**MO:** I'll say what one of my friends says about this. She has two addicted children. It's not good. Here's what she says, "I wouldn't wish this on my worst enemy. No way. It's way too hard." She also says, "I wouldn't go back to the way it was before. Speaking from a selfish place." Not selfish in a bad way. She's a better person and she knows it. She feels that she's a better person having...

**AS:** Been through it.

**MO:** And learning a lot about herself. Just the little petty stuff she used to really get wrapped around the axel. It doesn't matter anymore. She's walking with a different grace. Imagine that. It's like the cancer patient that's like, "This is going to kill me but man I have learned so much about me. I'm a better dad or I'm a better family member. I'm a better human having been shown that I'm going to die soon." Wow. I'm so grateful for the exposure to the lovely friends. Heartache, I'm going to experience things I don't ever want to experience again. Lately and I'm still in it. I don't like it at all, I hate it. It's kind of a number games when you're in a community of addicts. People die or people's lives come apart. It's really hard. In the meantime, they can do things to make things better.

**AS:** That's right. There's definitely an intensity to this particular path that we're on.

**MO:** Either way, intense joy. One other thing I discovered a couple years ago. When I was in really deep sadness, out on the lake with my dog. You get sad and your posture changes. Your head goes down. It's just evolutionary biology. It just kind of keeps us close to home. It's interesting. My head was down a lot. I was crying I was so scared. I was so everything, mostly just scared.

I just look up at the sky and the sky was brilliant. Clouds kind of tumbling through and brilliant winter blue. I realized my son's under the same sky right now. Not very far away at all, he was actually right here in the Twin Cities. I'm a pagan. I'm a born again pagan. I was raised Christian but I'm a pagan truly. That's my church. The sky's kind of this palette that day or night I just kind of look up whether it's starry or cloudy or grey. There's no bad sky. All the people I love are under that sky. Little things like that kind of bring me to the lake. There's a lake story in here somewhere but it kind of helps, it lightens things for me. When I look up at that sky and those lovely people I love and the people who aren't here anymore, they also used to experience that sky too. It helps turn down my noise a little bit. And just keep walking. There you go. That's enough.

**AS:** Thank you Mike.

**MO:** You're welcome. Thanks for listening.