Angel Gamboeck stops licking the wounds and lets the blood flow from so many missed attempts at finding a vein in her hand. Angel was shooting up two full bags of heroin and cocaine mixed together under a bridge in Denver. Photo by Joe Amon

Heroin in Denver; Angel's Fall

Heroin in Denver

By Michael Booth

Angel strides stiffly toward the trash container that serves as her bedroom. Even after 9 p.m., the record-breaking summer heat bounces into her face from the asphalt. She has been walking for miles, morning and evening. Thirteen hours this day at Santa Fe and Mississippi, flying her sign of hopeful lies. "Need help to get a bus ticket to Wisconsin." The sign netted one hundred and three dollars. People give money hoping against their better judgment that Angel will use it well. She is about to prove them wrong.

From her pile at the edge of a warehouse loading dock, Angel pulls a filthy bedroll and lays it out. She digs in the carefully managed drug compartment of her ever-present backpack, intent on the ritual. She twists open a scrap of tinfoil to uncover a pea-sized brown lump of heroin.

The lump drops into an empty tin meant to hold a votive candle. She sprinkles in a couple tablespoons of water, ties a string around her forearm to pop the veins, then begins the meticulous search for an unsullied path between her knuckles. Her movements are quick but sure — she could mix and inject with her eyes closed, but she stares intently at the dissolving dope.

After getting money from her boyfriends monthly social security check, Angel rents a room for a night to shower and sleep in a bed. She cleans out her backpack on the dirty bathroom floor of the cheap motel, separating the clean needles from the used and throwing away the cottons that aren't worth a wash. Photo by Joe Amon

All is quiet. The Yuppie softball players under the lights at Lincoln Park have gone home. There's a pause between light rail trains, 30 feet from Angel's trash bin.

The heroin plunges in, and Angel's eyes close. Now she is back to "normal." Tonight she won't sleep right away. This hit is merely an energy snack.

Angel Gamboeck's life as a young opiate addict in Denver is sad but increasingly common. As law enforcement officials across the country worry about a new generation of pill poppers moving into cheap heroin, Angel reflects all their fears.

She is a panhandler whose community of hundreds is ignored once commuters reach home. She is a perpetrator and a victim without the money or willpower to get help, searching for a safe place to score and sleep, headed for destruction.

During six months in the spring and summer, The Denver Post walked the streets with 23-year-old Angel, documenting a dangerous increase in heroin use.

One of the few things that can make Angel cry is thinking of her father, who Angel says has tamped down his own substance problems with a workaholic's demeanor. She remembers a letter her father wrote when she was 17. A friend of the family had taught her to smoke meth, and Angel had been up for a week straight. It was Mother's Day. Her father tried to wake her up for a family party.

The letter said, 'I'm worried about you, I don't want you to fall into a bigger trap of drugs than we already are.'

"I always wish I would have listened to him then," she says. "I guess I wouldn't have ended up here if I just never would have done drugs after that."

But she didn't listen. And an addict's progression has led her to Denver, living in a trash bin and about to lose even that.

The owners of the book warehouse have posted signs: all her possessions will be thrown out tomorrow morning. Clean, quiet Angel is not the problem, they say. It's the junkies around her, who defecate on their walls when they are trying to show leasing clients the nice views west.

Tonight she must move her bedroll off the sheltered loading dock where she has slept most of the last year to a barely concealed grove of weeds a mile south in an abandoned parking lot.

Tonight she won't sleep right away. This hit is merely an energy snack.

The lot is on the corner of a government-owned trespasser's haunt, every bedding place ruined by broken glass and crumbling concrete. The squalor is offset by a few good memories, though. Months and many homeless camping spots ago, she slept here with Josiah, her soulmate in love and drugs.

Joe's not available today. Angel knew he was behind bars but has just learned the length of his sentence for armed robbery in Wisconsin.

He'll have to write her from prison for the next eight years. She is used to writing him letters that can run eight pages long, on paper torn from a black composition notebook.

Iris holds his neck as Alice tries to hit the vein in his neck, he has abused all of his veins to the point that he can't get the heroin into his system. Photo by Joe Amon

federal felony? She will not say. Does she have ID? She says she does not. Will she give her name? For some reason, she gives her real one.

A radio check shows she has been caught before, riding without a ticket, on top of panhandling and other offenses. They issue her a 30-day ban from riding public transit and so her day ends in walking, the crumpled triplicate copy of the ban skittering behind her on the hot pavement.

By her own account, Angel has been on drugs more than half her life.

Weed at 12. Cocaine at 14, the first white line set out for her by her family. When Angel was 15, she said, her mom started smoking crack and shared it with Angel and her sister. Opium-based pain pills appeared the same year. She ingested them in a succession of forms: Swallowing, snorting and finally, shooting up her arm.

"I was totally against it for a long time," Angel said, of her family's wide and deep descent into any substance they could find. "I just caved into the peer pressure around me."

As an abuser of deadly prescription narcotics, she joined 12 million Americans and growing who abuse the pills every year. It's "hillbilly heroin," arriving legally through the mail, drugstores and clinics.

She did all this while graduating near the top of her class in a southern Wisconsin high school, with a 3.7 GPA, scholarship offers and a head for math.

What worries law enforcement, from Wisconsin to Denver to D.C., is the kind of simple math Angel did a couple of years ago.

Pain pills may be everywhere, but heroin as an opium delivery vehicle is far cheaper. Addicts discover this when they've finally burned through all the pills their friends give them, or the ones they steal from their parents' medicine cabinets: one Percocet pill on the street

For the same price, in a big city, a shooter can buy four or five doses of potent heroin. Enough to keep an opiate addict in a stupor for

Angel's fiance, in prison scrubs in the visiting room of the Kettle

"I was totally against it for a long time," Angel said, "I just caved into the peer pressure around me."

In central Wisconsin, starts to cry when he tells of the day Angel first injected heroin.

She was 21, living with Joe in an apartment near Madison, and doing janitorial work at a local John Deere plant that fit with her solitary nature. A friend of Joe's asked him for a heroin connection, and Joe asked his pill sources. When t he heroin arrived, Joe, already addicted to pills after a cement accident burned his skin, joined in.

Angel is 10 years younger than Joe. To her family's lament, she did what Joe did. She's been using the needle for all forms of her drugs ever since.

Both of Angel's parents have fought their own addictions. They saw the same streak in Joe, and hounded Angel to break it off.

Angel and Joe struck out West to get clean at an uncle's house in Wyoming. For them, clean meant using only Vicodin and Percocet, but they did manage 15 days without heroin.

They snuck to buy meth in Cheyenne, and the uncle kicked them out.

Without the money for tickets all the way to Wisconsin, the two ended up at a bus station in Denver.

The first person they met was a homeless junkie who hooked them up with some heroin, and Angel's spring of 2011 was a blur of scoring, sleeping outside, and sweet, doped-up reveries by the Platte River with Joe.

Angel carries her sleeping bag and blanket to the dock where she sleeps. she hides then during the day hoping to keep them safe from other homeless adicts. photo by Joe Amon

New York Times Magazine is mainly focused on lifestyle, culture and feature news presented in a simple yet visually interesting way. I decided to keep my design as simplistic as possible but still try to put some visually appealing aspects that would draw the reader. In the opening page I made the photo more that a quarter of the spread because I felt that was the most powerful and drawing photo of the entire portfolio. The picture is the main focus to the story in the opening page. However, I wanted the text to also play a part in the design as almost a graphic. I made the title American typewriter because I thought it was simple but still interesting to look at and had a sufficient feel that it didn't mock the topic. I knew a more bubbly or ornate font would cheapen the subject topic. Then for the opening paragraph in the first spread I made the first letter really big then consecutively made the font smaller to draw the eye to the text and hopefully make it look like the text was flowing instead of just placed on the page. I also chose to make the title and opening sentences to the text red to go with the blood in the picture and tie the text and picture together. Since the page was to be simplistic I felt the red gave it a pop that it needed. Finally, in the second spread with the main story I really wanted to emphasize the grid style to keep it simple but still have the bleeding photo and other photos to give a little variety.