

Rx Awareness Real Stories

Jamiann's Story



Masking the pain

I realized that I was addicted to prescription opioids in my early twenties. It isn't easy for me to tell this story, but I am grateful that I am able to, and I know that it's worth it. I believe it can help other Tlingit people and Indigenous people everywhere.

It started when I was prescribed opioids after a knee surgery, but I had struggled with substance use since I was a teenager. I grew up in Juneau in the 1970s and 1980s and experienced a lot of bullying because I was Native. In addition, I was repeatedly sexually abused when I was a young child through my early adolescence. Drinking alcohol and taking drugs made me feel numb and helped my mind and heart disconnect from the abuse and bullying.

When I turned 17, I knew things were bad. I went to a treatment facility in Sitka, where I celebrated my 18th birthday. I was able to stay sober for 16 months and started college in Kansas. I was the first in my family to go. It was a big culture shock, a Tlingit girl from Juneau going to school in Kansas, and I started using drugs and alcohol again.

When I was first prescribed opioids in my midtwenties, they made me feel better, but soon after, I started needing more. I remember how worried I would get when my prescription was low. I ended up surrounding myself with people who also had opioid prescriptions and using other drugs. I saw Elders and even teenagers trading drugs with one another. I traded for what I needed too.

Even though I knew I was addicted to prescription opioids, I didn't see it as a problem at first because I was still going to work. However, when I was unable to get more pills, I couldn't go to work; wasn't able to function; and felt sick, isolated, and depressed.

From bad to worse

Things got worse. I realized that I wasn't functioning and went to a treatment facility. I was in an abusive relationship at the time, and when I returned home after treatment, I started taking prescription opioids again. I got into a physical altercation and left home.

This is when I knew I needed to change. I checked myself into a behavioral health program and enrolled in a woman's program for Tlingit and Haida Tribes that helped me get the training I needed to leave the house and become a functioning citizen again. My tribe saved me. It's in our culture to lift each other up and even without my family or friends with me, I felt supported. I learned what it means to belong to my tribe, and they were always there every time I needed help. It's how I reentered the workforce and learned to run my own business. It's also how I found my job today.

Sharing my story

Now, I work at the Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes and am active in my tribe. It's been a long road. I share my story not only for myself but also for everyone else. Breaking the silence opens a platform for other people to start telling their stories. Our stories can connect with people and hopefully help them begin their own healing journeys of finding a happier place of existence.