

Rx Awareness Real Stories

JJ's Story



Tragedy strikes

When prescription opioids first came to my village in Alaska, no one knew what they were, how addictive they can be, and how they can ruin your life.

I tried prescription opioids for the first time my sophomore year of high school. I was visiting a friend in the hospital, and he would sneak me one or two pills when I visited. It didn't seem like a lot.

But after a season-ending wrestling injury my senior year, I was prescribed 40 opioid pills and finished the prescription by the next morning.

I started taking a lot of opioids that spring, and then I moved to Anchorage in August 2010 to start college. After a few weeks of classes, I was taking more opioids and had no interest in school at all. My only interest was in getting high to forget everything that was going on. My best friend had just been diagnosed with terminal brain cancer.

In December 2010, I flew home for Christmas. My older brother was living with me in Anchorage at the time, and he was also misusing opioids. I stayed up the night before my flight using drugs and fell asleep at a friend's house when I landed. My brother had arrived home before me. When I woke up, I found out that he was dead. He was 25 years old when he died of an opioid overdose. He was my idol. I always wanted to be like him.

I was only 19 years old and blamed myself for his death—if I had only been there to see him sooner. Around the same time that my brother died, my best friend's health started to deteriorate. He died 6 months later from brain cancer.

A problem escalates

My drug use got worse after that. I was taking so many opioids. All that mattered was making sure I had enough for today and could get more for tomorrow.

I was on a fishing trip in Togiak when I first tried heroin. I had run out of the opioids that I brought with me. I needed something and heroin was there.

There are many moments in my life that I don't remember because I was high—including my son's birth. A part of me thought when I had my son, things would change, but my addiction was stronger than that for many years.

A turning point

When I finally quit, it was really my son that got me there. I was in a crowded emergency room with him on New Year's Eve a few years later. He had dislocated his elbow. After about 10 minutes of waiting, I began to feel withdrawal symptoms and we left the hospital before doctors could care for my son. It took me 2 days to get my son seen in the emergency room, and I realized then that I was putting my addiction before my own son's health.

I called an addiction hotline for help. Since there were no openings available in Alaska, I traveled to Washington State for treatment. After 95 days, I came home to Dillingham and have been in recovery for more than 3 years. When I went to

treatment, I told myself that I would be honest so that I could deal with internal issues that I never talked about before. I did that and continue to work on maintaining honesty, open-mindedness, and willingness through my sobriety. Working through recovery, I know that none of us are perfect and all I can do is try to do the next right thing every day. I tend to wake up happy most days now.

Supporting my community by sharing my story

At the time, I didn't know anyone who was able to stay sober where I lived, and it was really important for me to try to help my community as best I could. I started to share my story and talk about it the way it was. I want to be honest and show that there is no shame in addiction.

We are people first—and there is hope. After sharing my story in my community, I was voted to serve as a member of my tribal council, which shows how much our community is looking for hope. We are a community that works together to lift each other up.

Today, I'm working as a commercial fisherman, teaching my son to hunt, and continuing to share my story. If 1,000 people hear my story but only one of them truly hears it, it's worth it.

