

One man's long road to recovery

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For J.D. Lawson, the years between 2000 and 2008 were the Dark Ages. During that time, he was a homeless heroin addict whose life was a wreck. He had no hope, no future and no purpose — other than getting high.

He lived with friends and family until they gave him the boot — forcing him to sleep in the woods or an abandoned trailer.

The center of his universe was heroin, and he sold whatever drugs he could get his hands on to support his addiction. He was not much of a father to his three children.

“I missed a big chunk of their lives,” he said, scrunching his face into a grimace. “I love my kids, and I feel horrible when think how badly I neglected them.”

Education derailed

Lawson grew up in Bloomington. His life began veering off course at age 16, when he started smoking pot and skipping school. He was a member of the Bloomington High School South football team that won the 1993 state championship. But getting high was more fun than showing up for practice, so he was kicked off the team halfway through the season.

He managed to graduate from South in 1994, but lasted only a few months at the University of Southern Indiana before dropping out due to his preoccupation with pot. He then lived with his parents, bouncing from job to job and selling drugs to support his new addiction — heroin.

He was first arrested in 1996 for possessing pot, drug paraphernalia and a handgun and was put on probation for a year. For the next few years, Lawson sold and used heroin, but managed to elude law enforcement.

“I was good at what I did, so I never got arrested,” said Lawson, whose neck, arms and chest are festooned with tattoos. “But during those years, my heroin addiction grew exponentially.”

‘I was Superman’

Lawson said it was his recovery from a brush with death in 1999 that sent his life spiraling out of control. Due to a buildup of fluid around his heart, he was in a coma for 10 days, then had heart surgery at IU Health Bloomington Hospital.

“I woke up after the surgery, and there was a preacher at my bedside telling me I was going to be all right,” he said. “The doctors had told my mom I probably would not survive, so when I left the hospital

I figured I was Superman. I thought I was invincible, and for the next 10 years I went crazy.”

That craziness involved criminal behavior. In 2008, Lawson was shot in the back by an angry property owner in Greene County after Lawson had broken into his abandoned home to steal copper tubing he'd hoped to sell for drug money. Lawson nearly bled to death while being flown by helicopter to Methodist Hospital, where he underwent a 10-hour surgery. Upon his release, he was convicted of burglary.

Over the next few years, he was convicted multiple times for theft and burglary after targeting cars for catalytic converters or abandoned homes for copper. He spent about three years in prison and jail, including two years in state correctional facilities at Putnamville and Branchville.

“In prison, I lived like everyone else,” he said. “When you're in the jungle, you live like an animal.”

Lawson said he and his fellow prisoners found it easy to get their hands on drugs, smuggled in by visitors or corrupt correctional officers.

“People in prison are clever, and will find a way to get drugs,” he said. “I went in as a heroin addict and came out with three new recipes for cooking meth.”

Finding ‘hope’

Lawson served his final 90 days of incarceration in the Monroe County Jail, where he learned about Centerstone's HOPE (Helping Offenders through Partnership and Employment) program, which helps ex-offenders identify a career path, earn a certification or degree and secure employment.

When he was released from jail in November 2012, he was accepted into Monroe County's Drug Court, where offenders can have their charges reduced or suspended in exchange for drug counseling.

“I knew that would help me overcome my drug addiction, but I knew I also needed help finding employment,” he said. “I thought the HOPE program might help me do that.”

After entering the HOPE program in December 2012, Lawson honed his job interviewing skills.

“I actually had people skills I'd learned on the street,” he said. “But the program taught me how to transfer those skills into a professional setting.”

Like how to choose his words more carefully.

“I used to tell employers I just got out of the penitentiary, but that's a scary word,” he said. “I learned to tell them I'd been incarcerated for a period of time.”

The HOPE program provided him with an eye exam, eyeglasses, work pants, work shoes, dress shirts, bus passes and cellphone minutes so potential employers could reach him by phone. It also paid half the cost of a new suit.

“When you dress properly, you not only make a better first impression, but you feel better about yourself,” he said.

In January, the 37-year-old Lawson landed a pizza-making job at DeAngelo’s, where he recently got a raise from \$7.75 to \$8 an hour. Because the job involves some heavy lifting, and because Lawson had back surgeries in 2001 and 2004, he’s grateful for the back brace provided to him by the HOPE program.

Next month, Lawson hopes to get his driver’s license — something he’s not had since 1999 — and then save enough money to buy a used car. But until then, he will continue catching a city bus to work, then walking home after he finishes his night shift. All that pavement pounding has worn holes in the soles of his shoes, but he’s not complaining.

“I’m grateful to DeAngelo’s for giving me a chance,” he said. “I’m dedicated to changing my life.”

Lawson has moved into a two-bedroom rental home he’s sharing with a buddy, signing his name to a lease for the first time in 13 years. He spent a week in Indianapolis earning his certification as a “peer support specialist,” enabling him to work in a mental health center as the first point of contact with clients.

“It allows me to talk to new clients and tell them my story,” Lawson said. “I give them someone they can relate to because I’ve been where they’re at.”

Bright future

Today, for the first time in years, Lawson feels good about himself. He’s been clean and sober for 19 months, and says his life is heading in the right direction.

He volunteers four days a week at Centerstone’s Recovery Engagement Center — working at the front desk and helping lead a weekly recovery group for at-risk youth — and helps teach weekly art classes to Stepping Stones clients.

But his life is not all satin.

“I wish I could say that now that I’m sober everything is easy, but I still have good days and bad days, and there are times when one little thing will trip my whole day up,” he said. “But I have a great support team, and with the tools I’ve been given from Drug Court and Project HOPE, I can keep moving forward.”

He particularly credits the care he’s received from Melissa Oran, his HOPE specialist; and Alana Luttrull, his job developer and certified recovery specialist.

“They have been an integral part of my support system,” he said. “I was seeing them almost daily for awhile. If I had an issue, they would be the first to know. When my uncle passed away, Alana walked into the room and knew instantly something was wrong. Then she took the time to talk to me about it.”

Next month, Lawson will begin classes at Ivy Tech, where he hopes to study for two years before transferring to Indiana University.

“My goal is to get a social work degree at IU and eventually a master’s degree,” he said. “I want to work with people like me who are struggling with addictions. And I want to be an example to them of a person who’s made some bad decisions but has still achieved something in life.”

Perhaps more than anything else, he longs to be a good example to three people in particular: his children, now teenagers.

“I phone them or text them every day, and spend time with them whenever I can,” he says, his blue eyes moistening. “They tell me ...”

He pauses for a moment to regain composure.

“They tell me they’re proud of me.”