

took himself to detox, but kept falling back into the same destructive cycle.

"I just became a full-on alcoholic," he says.

By the summer of 2013, alcohol had taken its toll. Frequently feeling ill and having suffered "some ailments," Sandoval went to see a doctor. That's when the blow was delivered: "You have three months to live."

"I always knew it was going to lead down that path if I continued," he says, "but for it to be smack straight in your face so quickly. I didn't know what to think about it."

Sandoval's doctor told him all the tissue in his liver had been destroyed. Without healthy tissue, it would not be able to regenerate. This was it.

"I remember going to the parking lot and just sitting there and thinking, 'What the fuck Jesse? What did you just do?' It's all me, you can't blame anyone – it was just all me and my decisions."

His son's maternal grandmother took him to get a second opinion. She drove because, despite the bleak prognosis he received a couple weeks prior, he had not stopped drinking.

"I don't know what I was thinking," he says. "If I'm going out, I'm going all blazes of glory – or I kept numbing myself to the reality."

Again, blood was drawn. They left the doctor's office and headed back to Sandoval's house in Northeast Portland. Fifteen minutes later, he was kicking off his shoes while his then 9-year-old son played with Legos nearby.

The grandmother went upstairs to check phone messages. They had already received several from the doctor's office they had just left. "Take him to the hospital," the messages said. "He's not going to make it through the night."

"She came running down and grabbed me," says Sandoval. "She said, 'Get in the car.' I remember putting on my shoes and – it still breaks my heart – I just turned, and I waved at my son, and I said, 'Guess I'll see you later dude.' That's all I could muster up, that will haunt me forever."

When he arrived at Providence Portland Medical Center through the emergency room, a bed was already waiting for him. But all he could think about was getting another drink.

"I fought tooth and nail. I wanted to get out of there so bad – to the point where code red was called – and they had people come in and restrain me," says Sandoval. "I didn't care that he said I would die if I left the hospital."

"Even though I wanted to live, and took myself to doctors right before the emergency room, I forgot all of that because the drink made me feel warm and safe, even though logically, I knew it didn't."

Looking back, he says it's still hard for him to fathom how much the single-track mindset of alcoholism had caused him to change from the person he really was.

For two weeks, he remained in the intensive care unit. Doctors brought first-year medical students to his bedside, telling them, "This is what happens when you drink, you will not see this guy in the morning."

But morning after morning, he was still there.

The way Sandoval tells it, his organs had a "pow wow," deciding to take turns functioning in order to keep him alive. At one point his kidneys shut down, then his



PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

To the right of Jesse Sandoval is a carved image of Tsil, the Hopi character that has become an archetype for his new endeavor, Los Roast. Tsil's name translates to "chile pepper."

liver, then his pancreas wasn't working properly – on top of it all he was going through severe alcohol withdrawal.

Astonishing hospital staff, he managed to pull through, but doctors were concerned about the damage inflicted on his central nervous system. He spent his last week at the hospital in physical therapy, relearning how to balance so he could walk and how to hold a fork so he could eat.

"I always had to be reminded of days and dates," he says. "They were unsure how much of my coordination I would get back."

Memories of his hospital stay are foggy, but Sandoval remembers with clarity a recurring vision that still lingers in the back of his mind.

"I'm not going to go down the path of saying I saw the light at the end of the tunnel, I just know that when I was not here, I feel like some sort of higher power came to me, and I saw this image," he says. "A group of sprites looking down at me. As if I was awakening on my back looking up at two silhouettes, and some sort of Native American face came clearer and more defined. I had never seen this image before in my life."

The image frequented his dreams throughout the rest of his hospitalization.

When he was well enough, he went straight to a drug and alcohol rehab facility in Albuquerque. Doctors warned that one more drink would literally kill him. This time he listened.

"It's really disappointing to me how quickly people write off people like myself," he says, "not giving credit to the fact that every human being gives up on something at some point."

"You can't just disingenuously write someone off as a fuck up or someone who just doesn't care. I probably would have gone back to drinking if I hadn't taken a moment to give compassion to myself, and to understand that you do make mistakes."

"As heavy as it becomes, there is a point where you start to turn it around, and when you've totally succumbed to a substance, it's very difficult to find that starting point – your judgment is skewed. I'm not asking anyone to feel sorry for me. I made my decisions. I made my mistakes. I have to live with them."

After rehab, Sandoval stayed with his sister a few months before deciding he was ready to return to Portland.

"I came back, and I got myself acclimated, and then went back to work with Los Roast. It was really good to see Marshall, and give him a hug, because for all intents and purposes, he's that brother I never had, and I think it would have been a darn shame if I had not seen the potential that we created to see it through to where we are now."

And now business is good. Their jarred chile peppers have made it onto the shelves of New Seasons and other stores stretching from rural Oregon and Portland to Seattle. Their green chile is also featured on the menus of several Portland restaurants, winning Blue Goose Café and White Owl Social Club best and second best green chile cheeseburgers in a 2014 ranking by The Oregonian. Despite the uncertainty surrounding Sandoval's longevity, the partners are looking forward to opening Los Roast's first commercial kitchen near Cathedral Park.

In the months following his hospitalization, Sandoval began to question why he was still alive.

He searched for meaning and for answers, and he started to research Native American spirits in an effort to solve the mystery of the face that permeated his hospital bed dreams. He was looking at kachina dolls, which depict spirits in Pueblo Indian mythology, when he found the familiar face.

"It sounds made up, but it's kind of creepy. His name is Tsil. He's a runner and basically he's underneath the Sun God, and his role in the Hopi tribe is to go to villages and race kids. In a nutshell, it's kind of like a rite of passage. If you beat him, you're accepted; now you're older, they get rewards and riches," he explains. "If Tsil wins, he stuffs chiles in their mouths and burns their mouths or throws mud at them, but it's in celebration, like 'Ha ha! You didn't win!'"

The connection between himself, a chile pepper salesman, and the Hopi kachina Tsil, who shoves chiles in people's mouths, was clear. Tsil quickly became his archetype – a picture of Tsil is printed on the back of

Sandoval's business cards and the spirit's likeness serves as his Google Plus profile photo.

But chile peppers and Tsil haven't replaced the drums entirely.

"During that whole alcoholic period, I said 'fuck music. I'm done with music, I'm done playing drums,'" he remembers. "I often think that towards the tail end of The Shins, I stopped becoming a craftsman. I think someone who loves their craft always keeps sharpening their tools, and toward the end there, I – for whatever reasons – just lacked the motivation or didn't see the reason."

Through recovery he learned his decision to abandon the drums likely added to the void he was feeling as he drank himself to near death.

He got back into playing, took some lessons, and about two months he ago joined Portland's Focus! Focus!, a self-described "indie fuzzfolk" band led by singer and songwriter Elly Swope.

You learn that chemically, your brain just kind of changes when you're an alcoholic," says Sandoval. "The baseline is skewed."

He's working to mend ties with some of his old friends, but in some cases, he says he had to wait for the dust he's kicked up to settle.

"Even though I may not have a lot of time," he says, "It's not fair to those who you may have shut out because of alcoholism, to all of a sudden expect them to give you an ear."

"I've reached out to James, and James and I have talked, that's probably the biggest one that was on my bucket list in the hospital, I was like there's one person I really need to talk to and it was him." When the two spoke in December, Sandoval says Mercer said he was shocked to hear how far Sandoval had deteriorated.

He's also using his time to make sure his son understands why his father is sick. He uses the situation he faced the day he thought he was saying goodbye to his son forever as a "quality teaching moment."

"We talk about how it's important to take care of ourselves for ourselves. Be thankful for what you have. Say 'I love you' to people you love. Don't get so angry at all the little things. It also helps that when things seem too hard and impossible, being brave and dedicated, things start to seem more manageable," Sandoval explains. "He reminds me to take care of myself just as much as I remind him."

Sandoval seems to be optimistic, cracking a contagious smile here and there as he shares his story from the living room of his home in the Alberta Arts District.

His health is stable, which he says is the best-case scenario. He's officially applied for a liver transplant, but isn't sure if he'll qualify. The antiquated organ transplant system, he says, is a "crap shoot."

As welcoming and encouraging as someone closing a bar door and inviting you in to drink yourself silly may be, he says, that same encouragement and friendship can be found in recovery.

"It's different for me personally, it's not as rewarding initially, but there's something to be said: It's really fun stumbling out of a bar laughing and joking, it's a whole new experience walking out of group laughing, and being sober."