

‘I thought I was dying’

RECOVERY continued from front page

Fentanyl is a highly potent synthetic opioid that is similar to morphine, but is 50 to 100 times more potent. It is a prescription drug that is also used illegally. Similar to morphine, it is a medicine that is sometimes used to treat patients with severe pain, especially after a surgery.

Later on, while giving birth, McNeel had to have a cesarean section to deliver her daughter.

“After that I got pills to help with the pain and realized I also really liked the opiates at that point, so I stayed away from them, especially since I was pumping breast milk and I didn’t want that in there,” she says.

Three years later McNeel met a man through her family that she dated for a few months before he ended up going to prison. The two stayed in contact. When he was released in 2019, they got back together and he reintroduced her to opiates.

“At first he would get me pills, then they became too expensive so then it was suboxone, which made me sick,” she says. “Then, he brought home some black tar heroin. Things went downhill from there. I was hooked from the first time I used it. Even if you only use it once or twice, you get withdraw-



als. Then I started using meth on top of it to stay awake since I was using so much heroin.”

At the time, McNeel’s children lived with her full-time and despite her addiction, she said they didn’t go without having basic needs met.

“There wasn’t a problem with them,” she says. “I made sure they went to school every day, and were always fed and clothed.”

Her secret lifestyle came to a screeching halt on June 6, 2020, after she and her boyfriend were arrested after stealing 17 guns from a sporting goods store, which they sold in Portland in a desperate attempt to buy heroin and keep from going into withdrawals.

Opioid withdrawal symptoms include cold sweats, nausea, diarrhea, body aches, depression and anxiety.

“My boyfriend left DNA at the scene and he was already in the criminal database because of being in prison,” McNeel says. “Every police officer in Tillamook knew him.

They arrested us at my house. Thankfully my kids were not there. I was detained for four hours and charged with second-degree burglary, 17 counts of theft, and possession of heroin and meth.”

It was the first time she had ever been arrested, let alone charged with multiple felonies. McNeel then entered her own personal hell while detoxing off heroin in jail with no medical supervision or even Gatorade to help ease dehydration caused by severe vomiting and diarrhea.

“I thought I was dying,” she says. “I was so sick that all I wanted to do was smoke a little heroin to make it go away. But once I got my brain back in order, I couldn’t believe it had destroyed my life in only a year.”

After two weeks in jail, she was released. Ultimately, her multiple felonies were reduced to one and she served 31 days in jail, plus two years of probation. As part of the plea agreement, McNeel agreed to go to treatment upon her release.

“I wanted to come to the Tribe to get help,” she says. “The turning point was sitting in my jail cell, being left with nothing but my thoughts and being forced to reflect on everything. I literally lost it all: My job, my kids and my freedom.”

Sorrow turned to anger at herself for ever trying drugs in the first place.

“I was like, ‘What the hell was I thinking? What possessed me to do that?’” she says. “The only thing I could tell you was that I just didn’t want to get sick.”

McNeel’s ex-husband paid her mortgage while she was incarcerated so the house wouldn’t be foreclosed on.

“He was amazing about that,” she says. “I just wanted to get my life back. I knew I needed to have a job and be productive. I got hired at the Tillamook Smoker and I am so grateful to them for giving me a second chance when many employers wouldn’t have.”

Something that has kept her on the road to recovery is making sure to see her therapist at Behavioral Health on a regular basis.

“We’re like a family at the Tribe and we talk about things going on in our lives,” she says. “We love each other and care about each other.”

McNeel also enjoys the opportunity to participate in cultural activities with others at Behavioral Health.

“Joe (Martineau) can bead and we had a one-on-one session where he taught me to do that,” she says. “It is almost like meditation and also was a real confidence builder. We have also made dream catchers and medicine bags, and done weaving. My dad has really been supportive during this journey. I give all of the things I make to him.”

After almost 15 months of sobriety, McNeel says she still gets cravings, usually when she is stressed or upset about something.

“I am a chronic worrier and with heroin, you don’t worry while you are using,” she says. “Sometimes I think it would be nice to use, but that feeling is just short term and I need to think long term.”

McNeel says the most challenging aspect of recovery is dealing with the judgment that inevitably comes from other people.

“No matter how long I’ve been sober, I’ll always be a heroin addict in (some) people’s eyes,” she says. “It doesn’t matter that for 39 years before that, I was clean and sober. I will constantly be defined and judged for something that so many people fall into. A lot of people struggle with addiction, they just don’t get caught like I did.”

The most rewarding aspect of sobriety is being sober itself.

“I love having a clear mind and being able to make decisions, and to be proud to be myself,” McNeel says. “The people I have met who stayed sober are some of the strongest people. We deal with our addiction every day and fight every day.”

She adds that a common misconception is that if someone struggles with addiction then they are a bad or abusive parent.

“That is just not true,” McNeel says. “I raised my kids for seven years alone. The love for my kids is what keeps me in recovery. Heroin took away my self-esteem and my will to continue. Recovery has given it back to me.” ■

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