

# I Fought the Scourge of Narcotics—and Won



Nadine Portugal combs the hair of her four-year-old daughter Fawn. Having the child with her has aided Nadine in making her readjustment to a normal life.

At 25, this pretty mother of three seemed doomed to the slow suicide of dope addiction; then help came from an unusual source: a group of ex-addicts.

By NADINE PORTUGAL

as told to Lou Jacobs, Jr.

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At the nursery school where she works, Nadine (above) helps one of her pupils, Victoria Lawford, niece of President Kennedy. At left, she discusses problems with other ex-addicts.

TWO AND A HALF years ago, I was approaching desperation after eight years of narcotics addiction. At 25, I had a husband (who also used heroin and sold it as well to support our "habit") plus three children and a depressing illness which amounted to gradual suicide.

I had been through the depths of living—if you could call being hooked "living"—and after a few weeks in jail I was out on bail fighting another arrest for addiction.

It is not easy to describe how a girl can reach this very frightening level, not knowing how to go in any other direction. But the road to narcotics was shown to me early. I was one of six children and grew up in San Pedro, Calif. When I was four, my father was killed while attempting a holdup. My homebody mother's second husband was a dope addict. Through his influence I began smoking marijuana when I was 12 or 13, just for kicks.

By the time I was 17, I had graduated to heroin, which is a very expensive—and dangerous—drug, and that year I married a longshoreman whose habit matched mine. We bought a home and settled down to what may have seemed, to the casual observer, a normal life. But within two years, I was too sick to care that we had lost our house, that I had borne my second child, that I was being watched by the authorities.

We moved often and had constant financial difficulties, even though my husband worked steadily. In a few years, there were three children to feed; but our craving for heroin was growing harder to satisfy, and we lived in a haze.

Drug addicts often steal because they can't keep a job. Their laziness stems from the fact that drugs depress rather than stimulate the user. They also constipate and make one prone to respiratory diseases and jaundice. I know what an awful effect they had on me, for I was 20 pounds underweight. During most of this time, I wasn't running around much; I was in my own home, raising my children. I guess a "square" (our term for nonaddicts) who visited me would have thought I was just a very

neurotic housewife, thin and antisocial. Such a person probably would not have realized that I was on drugs.

I tried more than once to "kick the habit," as giving up drugs is called. In fact, after the third month of my first pregnancy, I stopped using the needle entirely. I didn't want to give the baby a physical stigma. But I became hooked again afterward. With my second child, I also stopped for a number of months, but during my third pregnancy I couldn't tear myself away from heroin until two weeks before the baby was born. As an infant, little Fawn had to kick her own mild habit, poor thing.

The longer you are on drugs, the harder it is to give them up. For most people, they are slow death. I've heard that the confirmed addict doesn't live much beyond 45 years.

To best understand the perplexed life of a narcotics user, you have to keep in mind that they live in their own unreal world, setting up customs and standards to suit their sickness. I could love my children, but drugs blocked real depth of feeling. Narcotics numb the senses in many ways. You can't love another adult unless you can love yourself, and an addict is trying to destroy himself, so how can he have an honest relationship with anyone?

## Getting Narcotics Money—at Any Cost

Perhaps you now understand the pattern of my life. I was barely existing, and I was terribly afraid. Each day, I had to have five or more shots of heroin, which cost anywhere from \$25 to \$150. Intermixed with the fear and the narcotic-induced euphoria were eating, sleeping, house-keeping, and child care. I knew some desperate months when my husband was in jail, when we had little money, when I had to sink as low as a woman can for my next fix.

Then came the last of my many arrests when finally I did some jail time. By then, I was ready to seek a drastic solution to my drug problem. I had heard about Synanon House in Santa Monica, Calif. Started in 1957, it is a place where former addicts live and work to help each other return to normal lives.

When I got out on bail in December, 1960, I was accepted at Synanon

with little more than the clothes on my back. I spent my first few weeks kicking the habit again—and searching for the gimmick (addicts always seem to be looking for ulterior motives). But I never found it. Now, of course, it doesn't seem so strange that anybody would want to help me without some strings attached. But at that time, unselfishness was seldom a part of my life.

I remember wanting to escape from Synanon and go back to the temporary comfort of narcotic fog. For several weeks, the people at the House stayed with me, restraining me physically when they had to. They told me I would get over the longing for dope; they talked to me in the language I knew. I cried and I pleaded, but I couldn't resent their counsel, for they had been through the same ghastly experience.

Eventually I could admit my feelings and my cravings, both in the group therapy held three times a week and with those who "stood guard" over me in a sense. Within a month, I was over my antisocial urge to run, to destroy myself; I could begin to face reality on a new level. Taking the advice of the people at Synanon, I placed my children in a foster home. I was ready to start afresh with no outside pressures.

Everyone who lives here at Synanon is clean—no drugs ever, no liquor, either. Ninety percent of the people who stay 90 days or longer are off drugs for good. Misfits all, former addicts learn to respect their own value as individuals, leaning on others until they are strong enough and wise enough to help newcomers the way they were helped.

Still out on bail for my last arrest, I was again rescued by Synanon through an ex-addict attorney who lives at the House. He went to court and gained my acquittal. That was a relief. Though I hadn't a cent, Synanon never asked me for money. The House was strapped for funds and in litigation about zoning, but somehow contributions came in. Synanon never solicits them.

Gradually I found a useful life, starting with housecleaning and maintenance jobs to earn my keep. We have nearly 150 people with all kinds of backgrounds, but they get the same kind of help for a common problem. I began to realize that I was worth more than just a body in which to stick a needle. I found that the normal, everyday life which most people lead

may not be so easy to take, but it's far more agreeable than being sick from drugs.

In six months I was well enough to have my youngest daughter, Fawn, come live with me in one of the houses for women with children. My other youngsters, seven and nine, live with a kind family in a Los Angeles suburb, and I see them often. Although my husband and I have broken up, I hope to have my own home someday. I'll have my children with me again.

In a few more months, my regular job was to care for the children at the House, a task I shared with the other mothers. Then a minister asked if one of us would like to work at his church's nursery school in return for her child's tuition. I was eager to accept the job. I wanted to feel part of a normal group—and children are a wonderful contrast to the synthetic life I once led.

## I Am Winning the Right to Live Again

Fortunately, the nursery decided to create a training program for me as a teaching assistant. When I've passed some educational courses, I'll be qualified as a full-time teacher.

At present, I work five mornings a week, planning the routine for 10 preschoolers, one of whom is President Kennedy's niece, Peter Lawford's darling little four-year-old, Victoria.

When a few of the church board members resisted my working with children there, the minister and the school's director were my champions. I think I will prove that an addict can make a new life.

The money I earn goes into the Synanon treasury, but I keep \$10 a month for savings, and I can buy necessary clothes not donated to me by the House.

In the past year, I met a man at Synanon with whom I hope to plan another life when we are both strong enough to face the outside world. I have plenty of years ahead in which to make up for the time I lost living like a human animal. I'm understanding more about myself through helping others, just as I was helped. The mirror on my wall is now a friend, not the revealing enemy it was for so long.

And I'm determined to keep it that way.