



MY STRUGGLE WITH COCAINE ADDICTION

Since I was a young boy, I wrestled with feelings of not measuring up. So I worked hard in school, got good grades, and went to law school. But even if others no longer doubted my worth, I still did. So I drank and smoked pot. Both helped me forget the feeling that I wasn't good enough. But there were hangovers and worries about the cops, and when I woke up I not only felt not good enough – I felt sick too.

I was a first-year associate at a mid-size firm. I wasn't defending the theory of evolution or saving innocent men from the electric chair, but I worked hard and made good money. And I drank. My best friend at the firm was a first-year named Lee. The two of us drank with all the other lawyers. When they left and went home, we would roll a few joints and get high.

Lee lasted six months at the firm. After he left, I figured I could make more money on my own, so I started my own practice. I married and I got a pilot's license. It all made me feel better but still not good enough. So I kept drinking and smoking pot to make me feel better. Even so, no matter how hard I worked, no matter how much money I made, I never felt good enough. Until the night I met cocaine.

My wife, six-months pregnant, was chatting in the next room with the friend she had just met in Lamaze class. The other father-to-be and Lamaze husband offered me my first line of coke. It was the feeling I had been looking for ever since I was a boy. Suddenly, I was focused and creative and benevolent and wise and omnipotent. Like Superman or Clarence Darrow or Atticus Finch. I finally felt complete. I wanted to stay that way for the rest of my life, but the Lamaze husband only had half a gram and it was gone in an hour and a half. I asked where I could get more. I was 29 years old.

My business was good and my marriage great. I

felt excited about impending fatherhood. Cocaine made everything even better. It made me feel like I was working harder and smarter.

I didn't tell my wife anything about it, and I was worried that she would find out if her pregnant friend's husband was my supplier, so I asked a client if he could hook me up. I bought a gram every day or two from him. I used it in my office, always late at night to help me work. When the coke was gone, I wouldn't do any more for a few days.

Another young lawyer, a guy with political connections, asked me to partner with him. I lied to him about my cocaine use. Other than that – and the lying to my wife, and the days that were becoming harder to get through without coke, and feeling worthless when I wasn't high – life was good.

It was a two-man operation, and my partner was out of town about half the time. I was carrying the load. So who could blame me for doing more coke? I had always worked late – and now I worked even later. I'd lay out a few lines on my big glass desk, chop them up with a razor blade, then roll up a dollar bill and snort. Then I would read through clients' medical records and dictate pleadings and letters faster than Clarence Darrow could have ever imagined. Partly to reward myself, and partly to fuel myself for more work, I'd do a few more lines.

By the time I got home, my wife and baby girl were asleep. I was glad about that, because I could lay out my lines in peace. I wasn't holding out for a few days now. I was snorting a gram a night at home. Only after 5 p.m., though. That was a hard-and-fast rule. I came to work clean and I worked during the day clean.

Then I decided the "only at night" rule was silly. So I bought an amber-colored vial, with a tiny spoon attached to the cap by a chain. When at the office, I would visit the bathroom, unscrew the vial, and snort a couple of spoonfuls. When the bottle was

empty, I would drive to my dealer's – twice, three, four times a day. I learned to snort while driving.

I made new rules. I wouldn't use during trial work – that would make me sleazy. I wouldn't buy more than a gram at a time – that would make me an addict.

I got sick of carrying the load for the firm and I let my partner know it. He said he wanted to split up, and that was fine with me. I took a handful of the staff with me and set up my own office. That meant more pressure. Everyone needs a stress reliever, so who could blame me for buying more coke, three grams at a time, four grams at a time? It just made sense. And, if doing cocaine at night made me write briefs more efficiently, couldn't it make me more effective in court?

I rarely arrived home before midnight now. I hardly ever saw my daughter. My wife thought I was having affairs, accused me of lying, then divorced me.

There was only one way to make me feel better. When I was awake, I was high. Nine grams a day, seven days a week. People noticed. A young lawyer quit my firm, then a paralegal, then another paralegal. Before I knew it, almost all of my employees were gone. My clients were leaving, too, which wasn't so bad – they were often a pain – except with a \$1,000-a-day habit, I needed the money.

I sold the ranch. I sold the airplane. I borrowed from a client, who made me sign a promissory note against my gun collection. I needed more money, so I told my parents how my divorce had devastated me and that business was slow right now. I told them I was afraid I was letting my daughter, their granddaughter, down. If I could just get something to tide me over until my next big case, I could meet my obligations. They gave me \$60,000 – their entire life savings – but I still needed money, so I stole from my clients. I looted their trust accounts.

But my daughter still loved me. I tried to be a good father. I put her to bed at nine or ten and read her a story. Sometimes I'd make up a story. Then, when she was asleep, I'd put out my lines.

My little girl would be up by eight, but I wouldn't get out of bed until two. She'd be waiting in the living room, sitting cross-legged on the floor, in front of the

television. "Daddy," she said to me once, "I'm so hungry. I couldn't get you to wake up."

She never complained more than that. Not even when I took her out for a special dinner, then passed out face-down on the table. Not when I got her out of bed at 1 a.m. – I wasn't a bad father, I couldn't very well leave her alone – and had her sit in the car while I went into my dealer's house and got more coke.

My nose bled constantly, and the pain was horrible. Aspirin didn't help. Neither did drinking, nor smoking pot. So I did more coke. Scabs developed in my nose. One night, flashlight in hand, I inserted a Q-tip in my left nostril and it poked through to my right nostril. I had no more septum. Every morning, I would vow that I was finished with cocaine.

Then one night I couldn't breathe, my heart was racing, and my lips turned blue. I went outside to bury my stash in my overgrown yard, then I came back in the house to lay down and die.

Some time later, my old friend Lee tracked me down at my parents' house. I hadn't thought about him for more than 10 years – since the days we got high together as law firm associates. He asked me to meet him for dinner. At the restaurant, he told me he had read about me in the newspaper. "Sounds like you've got a bad drug problem," he said.

Who did he think he was? "It didn't say anything about a drug problem," I said.

"Let me tell you a story," Lee said.

He told me he was an addict, that he looted his clients' trust accounts, and that his license had been suspended. Now he was clean and he had his license back. He asked if I wanted to know how he had done it. When I said, "yes," he asked if I would go with him to a meeting.

The group was a 12-step meeting for lawyers. Sixty men and women. I recognized a lot of them as prominent leaders of the legal community. "I'm Lee, and I'm an addict," Lee said to the group. "I'm David, and I'm an alcoholic," another man said.

When my turn came, all I could choke out was "I'm Jeff, and I'm chemically dependent," but I didn't really believe it.

A lawyer behind me leaned over and whispered in my ear. "Keep coming back," he said. And I did.

Now I'm a practicing lawyer again. Not Clarence Darrow or Atticus Finch. Not a high roller with a single-engine Beechcraft and a habit that's killing him. Just a drug addict trying to get better. A person who hasn't used cocaine or had a drink or used any other drug in more than 13 years. A person that proved to himself that he was truly brave. A person with a new sense of accomplishment. And that's worth a lot.

This story is adapted and excerpted from "Blow Out: A Cautionary Tale of One Young Lawyer's Rise, Fall, and Improbable Redemption," JD Jungle magazine, April/May 2002. The complete story can be found at www.jdjungle.com.