

Ex-STHS football player on a new track – without heroin

Publisher's note: *This is the second of two stories about heroin use on the South Shore. [Click here to read the first article.](#)*

By Jessie Marchesseau

Josh does not look like your stereotypical Hollywood heroin addict. In fact, he sat two tables away from me at a local café for nearly 20 minutes while I waited for the subject of my interview to walk in, someone who *looked* like a heroin addict.

In black pants, black beanie and a white long-sleeved shirt, Josh looks like a typical Tahoe twenty-something-year-old snowboarder. He is clean shaven with a strong, muscular build, something he attributes to working out six days a week and eating healthy.

By looking at him, you would never guess that eight months ago Josh (whose name has been changed) was in a very different place. He was 60 pounds heavier, homeless, living on the streets in Los Angeles and instead of working out, he was shooting up heroin.

“I’ve replayed the whole thing, how it started, how it just spiraled all the way down, and I ended up at the very bottom,” he said. “I can’t imagine any lower you could go than Skid Row in LA. I can’t imagine anyplace worse.”



**“It’s like a horrible relationship, you know the person’s so bad for you, but you can’t get away from them because it’s all you know, and it’s all you want.”
– Josh**

Now 27, Josh’s downward spiral started 10 years ago, in high school. He was athletic, had lots of friends, snowboarded and played football for South Tahoe High School. When a doctor prescribed him pain killers for a football injury, he remembers liking it right from the start.

Though Josh did not get addicted to the pain killers, he did continue to dabble in other drugs. It was not until after high school that he tried heroin for the first time. A friend had done heroin before, and the pair drove all the way to the Bay Area to get some. Josh decided to just snort the drug at first, but after seeing the instant high his friend had from injecting it, he reached for the needle.

“It was all over from there,” Josh said. “I was 19, and until just seven months ago, it was constant.”

Back here in Tahoe, heroin was not readily available. But OxyContin, another opiate, was. Injecting the prescription

painkiller became a multiple times per day habit for nearly five years.

At first, Josh was able to hold together a fairly normal life. He had a girlfriend, a car, a job, even enrolled in the culinary program at Lake Tahoe Community College. He managed to hide his habit from family and friends.

But as the spiral continued downward, those things ceased to matter. He started blowing off work, sold his car for two eight balls of heroin (an eight ball is one-eighth of an ounce), and gave up trying to hide it. The only thing that mattered was getting high and getting enough money to get high. He sold everything he could and began stealing from friends and family: money, ATM cards, anything he could pawn.

At the same time, OxyContin was becoming harder to find and more and more expensive, up to \$80 for a pill that would last about six hours. Heroin, on the other hand, was becoming easier to find and was only \$5 to \$10 for a bag that could last just as long. Making the switch was easy. After all, this had all started with that first hit of heroin. But Josh's addiction was also escalating. One point, or a tenth of a gram, is considered a single dose of heroin for most people. Josh was doing six at a time.

His first run-in with the law was in 2008. Josh was pulled over with methadone in his possession, something he kept around for emergencies when he could not find heroin fast enough. He went to jail. Over the next three years he would go to jail six or seven more times. Even though he would detox while he was there, as soon as he was released, Josh would start using again.

"In my head it seemed like if I didn't have it, I didn't know who I was," he said. "It's like a horrible relationship, you know the person's so bad for you, but you can't get away from them because it's all you know, and it's all you want."

With the price of heroin going up, and Josh unable to hold a job, he and his new girlfriend decided to move to LA where the drugs were cheap. Once there, they blew all their money on heroin and ended up on Skid Row, sleeping on a cardboard box, all their worldly belongings in a shopping cart. He was arrested twice, held up at gunpoint and their shopping cart stolen. Josh had hit rock bottom.

“I just woke up and was like, ‘Who am I? What the hell has happened?’” he said.

For the first time in his life, he did not want to do heroin anymore. Josh had already been through court-mandated rehab numerous times, counseling, Narcotics Anonymous, methadone programs. Nothing had worked because he had never *wanted* to quit. This time was different. June 12, 2011, he called his mom and caught a bus back to Tahoe.

With a warrant out for his arrest, it was not long before the police caught up with him. He had never been so happy to be arrested. Josh spent the next three months in El Dorado County jail sobering up. It was finally over.

Clean since the day he went to jail, Josh said he has had no urge to start using again. His girlfriend also returned from LA and joined him on his journey to recovery. They motivate and support each other, neither one looking back.

At 27, Josh said heroin has taken nearly a decade from him. He is starting over, building a new life from the ground up. He is taking care of his body for a change, he and his girlfriend want to get married, and he hopes to finally finish culinary school.

While Josh got a second chance, not everyone is so lucky. Two of his friends made the El Dorado County coroner’s list of heroin-related deaths last year, and several others are in jail.

Josh said he feels like he has a good head on his shoulders today, and he never would have met the love of his life if he had not gone through this. Even so, if he could do it all over again, he wouldn't.

"If I could go back in time and not stick that needle in my arm, I would have never, ever done it, knowing what I know now."