

AN ADDICT IN THE FAMILY

Why We Wanted To Put My Brother Behind Bars



by megan ault • photos by chad harder

When crystal methamphetamine, a highly potent mix of noxious chemicals and stimulants, enters the bloodstream, it heads straight for the central nervous system, zapping feelings of hunger and fatigue, keeping users "up" for two to 20 days, commonly without any food or rest, placing impossible demands on the body.

The ingredients are easy to obtain and assemble. And it's not so much the ephedrine-based cold medication, the drug's main ingredient, that makes it so toxic, but the cooking process, which can employ battery acid, anhydrous ammonia, diesel fuel, formaldehyde, Drano and even urine. Considering that, it's not too surprising that once the high wears off this highly addictive drug often leaves users depressed, chronically fatigued, anxious, delusional and psychotic. The list of permanent damage to long-term addicts reads like a death sentence, with recent studies showing it causes more damage to the brain than heroin, alcohol or cocaine abuse.

There are no in-patient rehabilitation programs for drug addicts in Bozeman, just the Gallatin County Treatment Court, a court-ordered outpatient program where besides counseling, participants undergo weekly drug testing and meetings with a judge. When drug abuse and related crime continues and all else fails, prison—hardly viewed as an institution designed to rehabilitate addicts—is a last resort.

Crystal meth, however, is relentless and mean, sometimes dragging an addict and their family to that last resort.

What follows is my own story of dealing with a drug addicted family member in the Gallatin Valley. Many details have been omitted out of respect for my brother, others are still too difficult to wrap words around.



Three years ago this January I became a regular visitor at the Gallatin County jail. My youngest brother, then a 22-year-old Salt Lake City resident and crystal meth addict, had stolen an SUV just before Christmas; hopped in the vehicle parked in front of a hotel and headed for Bozeman while the owner was inside getting a room.

The phone rang alarmingly late that December night, and the rest unfolded like a vivid and terrible dream. "Hey Meg, how are you?" my brother asked, as if we had just spoken a week ago. It had been almost two years since I'd heard his voice, although during the previous Thanksgiving in Salt Lake City I'd asked my father to drive me around the streets near the homeless shelter. I wanted to catch a glimpse of him, envisioned myself grabbing and shaking him, asking him why he had traded his life for meth.

Over the previous years, drug rehab programs, even the court-

ordered lock-down variety, were always a short stay for my brother, and the over-burdened Utah legal system quickly taught him the consequences for fleeing them were few. In the beginning my parents scrimped to send him to expensive recovery programs, where drug abuse was treated as a disease rather than a crime. From there he descended to state run programs, ankle bracelets and homeless shelters. None of them kept him from meth.

My parents and I eventually submitted to the hope that he would get caught breaking the law, ————— CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

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charged with a felony and put in prison. Short jail stays didn't work. He needed to be taken off the streets long enough for his body and mind to surrender the daily obsession of finding and taking crystal meth. Perhaps then a rehab program might work.

Still, I couldn't call the Bozeman police when my brother phoned to say he was in town with a new car filled with presents for my young sons, couldn't tell the police that I had talked him into waiting for me at the Main Street Exxon gas station so they could go arrest him. "I'll be there in 10 minutes," I told him. "It'll be good to see you again. Just wait there."

Coincidentally, my parents happened to be at my house, visiting for Christmas. My heart pounded as I hung up the phone and tried to explain the situation. *He's Here. Yes. Right now. In Bozeman. At the Exxon Station. He says he bought a new SUV and has presents with him. I said I'd be right there. What should we do? I can't do it. Will you?*

My mother made the call.

When the jail finally allowed my brother to have a visitor in January, his face was aflame with acne, he was missing a front tooth and his hands trembled fiercely. The weeks before had been filled with brief reports that he was crazed from withdrawal, profane and pacing the jail cell for days and sleepless nights like a wild caged cat. I don't remember what we said that first tentative conversation, our phones separated by a pane of glass, but he was kind and humble in his blue hospital scrub-like uniform, grateful that I would visit. "Will you come see me again next week?" he asked. I cried.

Over the following weeks my parents met with Gallatin County Public Defender Bill Bartlett and County Prosecutor Gary Balaz. They explained their past frustration with the Utah judicial system, where despite the state's clean and conservative image, they had been told by numerous sources that because of growing crime and an underfunded corrections budget that a person literally had to kill someone to be locked up. They were relieved he had been arrested in Montana.

My father followed up with letters explaining how even drug rehab centers, because of their own past experiences in dealing with crystal meth addicts, were always reluctant to admit their son once they learned he was on meth. My mother told anyone who would listen about case studies where rats were given a choice of all the food or crystal meth they wanted.

The rats chose meth even while it wasted their bodies and minds, took it until it killed them. Illegal drugs are bad, but this one is evil.

My brother was legally an adult, which meant he could no longer be involuntarily committed anywhere. What options, besides prison, were left? My father finished by submitting a resume of sorts to the judge, detailing the downward spiral of troubles his son had seen over the years, testifying that to let him go or send him back to Utah would not only threaten society, but seal his son's death.

My brother smoked pot and took other drugs as a teenager, but it wasn't until he found crystal meth that

he became utterly unreachable. He was an attractive blond-haired, blue-eyed hyper-active Ritalin kid, smart enough at five years old to pull a clock radio apart out of curiosity, then put it back together in working order before getting in too much trouble. There were overcrowded Utah schools that didn't have time for a kid who didn't fit the mold, a principal who righteously informed my brother in fifth grade that he'd go to prison someday.

There was the challenge of fitting in as a non-Mormon boy growing up in a predominantly Mormon society. My parents have their own regrets, and for my part, I remember being too self-absorbed to pay attention to a nuisance little brother, nine years younger.

But my thoughts often pause on the manager of the burger chain where my brother worked, who supplied free crystal meth to his workers to ensure speedy customer service. My brother told us about this years after the fact, when we asked him how he started taking meth, and he relayed it matter-of-factly, without anger toward the manager, as though this sort of thing was not so unusual.

"Did the other workers take it?" I asked him.

"Oh yeah, sure," he said. "We all did. Most of us anyway."

Before crystal meth, he had been a daredevil skier, rock climber, and artist who loved to camp in the canyons around town and attend drum circles and concerts with friends. After getting his GED he drove an old VW van across the U.S., followed the band Phish on tour and came back muddled and different. He told people he was with the CIA. He went skiing with old friends, took a jump and broke his femur. The unscouted landing was flat, and his bones were also depleted of strength from his steady diet of drugs.

His old friends noticed the change, said he had gone from being cool to scary and

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stopped coming around. He sold off his ski gear and any other belongings worth money. He started hanging out with people whose faces we never saw in low-slung cars behind tinted windows. Jewelry, CDs and other items began missing from the house. He was told he wasn't welcome at home anymore (unless he went back for treatment), but sometimes snuck back into his old basement room through the window where my parents would find him curled up on his bed, sleeping something off. He couldn't hold a job anymore. Stealing and other crimes were the only way to support his habit.



After five months, my brother was taken in the middle of the night from the Gallatin County Jail to the Montana men's state prison in Deer Lodge. I was scared thinking about his new world, pinched by questions of whether prison really was the *only* choice left. Would he come out of prison someday even more damaged? Would he become so hardened that we wouldn't want to know him, even off drugs?

I often called my mother during these panics just to hear her say *Yes, of course it was the only choice left, he was so out of control, he would have died.* Since I had moved away from home years before, only returning for visits, it was my parents who understood the full truth of this and endured the dailiness of lies, broken promises and stealing that were all a part of dealing with a profoundly addicted son.

The men's state prison at Deer Lodge has an ominous presence, surrounded by a double-height fence topped with knife-like barbs and electric wire. Inside the fence is 68 acres encompassing the maximum security, high side and low side compounds. Low side, where my brother was, is designed for less dangerous offenders, with less restriction of movement than in the high-side or maximum-security sections.

Watchtowers peered down on my car as I followed the long road to the parking lot in front of the cement entrance building. I had filled out forms that took weeks to process and approve my visitation rights, had been informed of the strict dress code and how much change would be allowed in my pocket when I was led to the visiting room. I handed over my driver's license and my hand was stamped. The stuffy room was crowded with somber older couples, women with young children, and several giddy high school aged girls who had driven from all across the state to sit for a few hours with their husband, boyfriend, father, son or brother. We watched each other out of the corners of our eyes, not talking.

I was lined up with a group of people that would be taken to a less-secure visiting room, told to remove my shoes and patted down from head to toe. We were led by an officer through a courtyard filled with colorful flowers, tended by several prisoners, making two to three dollars a day for their work. I could hear the surreal sound of Native

Americans drumming, then saw them in a far-off section huddled in a circle. We arrived at a room with pop and candy machines, tables and chairs, and a small carpeted area with some toys. A black prisoner sat next to the guards in the front of the room, selling popcorn and loaning out board games in tattered boxes.

An officer brought my brother in and we gave each other an awkward hug, the first in years. I bought him pop, candy and chips and we talked about his future. On other visits I brought my youngest son, a baby then, and was told that it was against the rules for me to sit on the carpet with him. I was later directed by a guard to take my feet off the table. "Don't be a trouble-maker," my brother said to me in a low voice. "They don't put up with anything here. They'll send you home."

During one visit I arrived at the prison without my driver's license. There was an urgency to my visits, fueled by the thought that as the only family he had in Montana, I had to support him—and that maybe it would make a difference. I gave a middle-aged woman with dyed black hair a drawn out story about why I didn't have my license, told her about the four hour round-trip drive, then didn't do anything to stop her from seeing my tears. My brother was expecting me. "I'm sorry," she said. "I can't let you in without it."

She gave me directions to the Department of Motor Vehicles where I might be able to get another license, and I drove there like a maniac. I was met by two women, chatting behind their desks, and one of them told me that the person in charge of licenses didn't work that day. "Could either of you help me?" I asked. I explained my situation, they shook their heads, No, neither of them meeting my gaze.

After fulfilling a year of anger management, criminal thinking, addiction and other classes in prison my brother was accepted into the Connections to Corrections program in Butte, a 60-day live-in program filled with intensive group therapy and more chemical dependency classes. After successfully completing Connections he moved on to Pre-release in Missoula, a live-in supervised program where prisoners get jobs and begin transitioning back into society.

A Connections therapist, herself a past addict, told my mother as we prepared for my brother's transfer to Missoula to "expect him to relapse and go back to prison, probably more than once." My mother, who had spent hours researching and unwaveringly guiding this process cried as she told this to me, cried for the hope she had wanted to allow herself this time.

At first he did well in Missoula. He worked at McDonald's, quickly progressing to shift manager. He had an advocate he really liked in his Narcotics Anonymous group. But then he seemed to get restless. The teenagers who worked at McDonald's were always smoking pot out back by the dumpster. "It's hard, I really want some," he would admit.

"That's okay," my parents and I would tell him. "Call us, call your advocate, but stay away from it."

Coffee was legal, so he drank lots of it, sometimes even drinking espresso late at night. His advocate moved away, suddenly and with hardly a goodbye. My brother was getting tired of the meetings. Something snapped. He began missing shifts at work, not turning his paychecks over, acting weird. We still don't know if or what he took since the drug test came back negative (some drugs don't show up in urine), but he was acting crazy and belligerent enough that his case-workers thought he was preparing to flee, so he was sent back to prison.

Something snapped inside me too as I realized that all my phone calls, letters and visits weren't necessarily going to make him better. He would have to do it himself. Weeks and months began to slip by without talking to him. Then I would be driving somewhere, or folding laundry, and I would remember he was back in prison and feel guilty for living my good life and not thinking about him more often.

He called several months after he was sent back to prison. "They're transferring me to the prison in Glendive," he said. "I got in a fight, they threw me in the hole," he explained, referring to the prison's solitary confinement cell. "Call and write from Glendive," I said as the prison recording broke through, warning that our 10 minutes were up.

A few weeks later there was a call from a young-sounding female caseworker in Glendive. "I'm worried about your brother," she said. "I'm going to transfer him to the Shelby facility. I just thought I should let someone know since I couldn't reach your parents today."

"Is he getting in fights?" I asked.

"No, but he's depressed and it seems like he's getting picked on. I'm worried about his safety," she said.

I tried to pry for specifics, more details, any insights into my brother's world, but it seemed to mimic this whole process for me, a frustrating fight through continual fog for clarity. I joined my mother in researching crystal metham-

phetamine, combing Web sites, asking questions and talking to anyone with experience with this particular drug and its effect. Sometimes when things felt hopeless, scientific facts were the only concrete thing to grab on to.

Now, three years later, he has been accepted again for the pre-release program and is waiting for placement in Helena, Great Falls or Billings. There are the unknowns, like how much damage crystal meth has done to his brain, and how much healing may still take place. At times his thinking still seems disjointed, at others he seems like his old self, even eloquent in his conviction to make it this time. I wrestle with the indulgence of hope, worry what sort of peer group a 25-year-old ex-prisoner who can't be around alcohol or drugs will find. I worry about his impulsiveness, whether he will have the patience to make minimum wage and climb a slow ladder when he knows how fast money flies in the drug world. Ultimately though, his success is a matter of conscience and spirit, something I can share with him but must be rebuilt on his own terms.

Fear is no way to live, but crystal meth has brought fear to my family. I fear my brother finding meth again, and I fear him if he does. "I am scared of being out in the real world again," he recently told me. Despite the fact that there is little to recommend prison life, he knows his daily class schedule, mealtimes, which people not to talk to or even look at, what to expect. The outside world is a big unknown, with many choices. He will need a supportive community and his own inner strength to figure out what transformation means. I pray that he finds them, and holds on tight.

