

Faces of recovery: 'It would be a good thing to remember where it all started'

By Abby Tonsing | 812-331-4245 | atonsing@heraldt.com

Apr 30, 2017

Ashley Arnold, sober since Aug. 11, 2015

Ashley Arnold snorted heroin for the last time in the confines of the Monroe County Jail.

She was in the jail's detox unit and wiggled a half-gram free from a slit near the underwire in her bra. The hiding place served its purpose and then some: the heroin evaded pat downs by officers and made it into the jail undetected that summer night in 2015.

Hours earlier, Arnold had been with three friends riding around town selling heroin and prescription pills. One customer shared, and Arnold slipped the heroin into her bra for later. She didn't want the drug dealer with them to know she was holding. She didn't want to share.

As the car crept through a mobile home park at 3 o'clock in the morning, a Bloomington police officer pulled them over for an expired license plate. Arnold was the only one arrested. The officer found her OxyContin and syringe, and served two active warrants. He missed the heroin.

The half-gram of meth she shot up before venturing out that August night dropped her to her knees when she pushed down the plunger of the syringe. She vomited. Never before had her heart raced so fast.

Arnold was still speeding hard on the meth in the jail's detox unit. She considered keeping the heroin to stave off the sickness that would inevitably come later in the cell block. But the jail officer stationed nearby wandered away from his desk, leaving her all alone.

Arnold swallowed some of the heroin, then snorted the rest.

"Hesitant to be hopeful"

A nurse knocks on the back door of a rural home on an unseasonably warm February afternoon. She's there to teach Arnold how to care for the feeding tube inserted the week before into her stomach.

The first time the hospital discharged her with opioid prescriptions for pain, Arnold and her fiancé, Sam Jones, devised a plan. He changed the combination to the safe, and kept the numbers secret and the drugs locked up.

Jones tracks Arnold's doses, placing pills in the palm of her hand only when it's time. He transfers the prescription bottles from pharmacy, to house, to safe. Arnold doesn't want to touch them.

She's been in and out of the hospital this past year for unresolved and undiagnosed health issues. Each stay in a hospital bed comes with an intravenous pain pump of Dilaudid, the same opioid she snorted as an 18-year-old and started shooting when she was 22.

"I've been on the pain pump way too many times to be comfortable," Arnold says from a recliner in her living room. The black carrying case for her feeding tube sits near her feet. Boxes containing sterile tubing supplies and liquid food supplements fill the mud room of the modest home in northeastern Monroe County.

Preliminary blood tests indicate a three-month round of Zepatier may have cured Arnold of the Hepatitis C she contracted sharing needles with an old boyfriend. Another blood test is scheduled for May, followed by a third six months after that.

"I'm hesitant to be hopeful," Arnold says of the \$60,000 prescription treatment, which has chemotherapy-like side effects of extreme fatigue and stomach pain.

Eighteen months into sobriety, Arnold claims she's certain she won't ever go back to the streets in search of heroin and meth.

What shakes her confidence are the prescription pain meds in the safe, the IVs of Dilaudid at the hospital, the crippling depression and anxiety that accompanies it all.

She doesn't want her friends and sober peers at Centerstone's Recovery Engagement Center to think she's a hypocrite. Or worse, a liar.

Recovery coaches reassure her: Taking pain medicine as prescribed is not getting high. This is not a relapse.

It's too easy these days to let her mind drift back to a time when the only thing she cared about was finding the next fix.

Arnold wants to stop living in her head, and in her past. She hopes to get grounded during a visit to South Bend, where she spent eight weeks at the YWCA Women's Journey Chemical Dependency rehabilitation center. On the night she graduated from rehab, Arnold and Jones wrote their names on a decorative wall near the River Lights art installations along the St. Joseph River.

Now, the couple wants to show the spot to their children, and add the kids' names.

“I think right now, with my emotional state what it is, it would be a good thing to remember where it all started,” Arnold says. “And, remember how far I’ve come.”

“You use a needle one time, you’re done.”

Smearred black eyeliner fades into dark circles around eyes indiscernible in color under heavy lids. A dark haired braided ponytail unravels at its end. A wrinkled and freckled brow provides the only expression on her face. Arnold weighs just 103 pounds in the photograph from Aug. 11, 2015.

Tucked in the pages of a sobriety scrapbook, she keeps a copy of the jail mugshot taken the night she last did heroin. It was given to her by the probation officer who fought to get her admitted to the YWCA rehab.

“I was so sick. I was at my worst possible moment in life,” Arnold says, examining her face from months ago.

The 26-year-old can trace her opioid addiction back to when she was 16, after the birth of her daughter. She abused a doctor’s prescription for Lortab, took more pills than she needed for pain.

Her father was generous with his own pills, offering Vicodin for headaches or cramps. Arnold didn’t have to steal or sneak around; all she had to do was ask.

A fibromyalgia diagnosis brought in more prescriptions. By 18, Arnold had a prescription for 180 Dilaudid pills a month. She’d snort or sell a month’s supply in two weeks. Later, she became reluctant to sell her stash. She wanted all the pills for herself.

Once she got labeled as a drug abuser in pharmacy records, she could no longer get Dilaudid prescriptions filled. So, Arnold turned to the street. She knew a woman with monthly prescriptions for 200 Opana, a long-release form of morphine. Arnold bought pills from this woman 10, sometimes 12, times a day.

When her father died of a suspected heart attack in December 2010, Arnold’s grief helped her agree to a boyfriend’s introduction to smoking meth and snorting heroin.

The highs of snorting heroin plateaued. Apprehension about turning to the needle shifted to acceptance in order to continue getting high.

Arnold lied to a pharmacist to get a pack of syringes, saying she needed them for her insulin-dependent mother. She crushed up a Dilaudid, mixed the powdered pill with water in a spoon, warmed her shot with a lighter, loaded a syringe, then bent and broke several needles in her skin before getting it right and hitting a vein.

And when she did, when the funny and the fuzzy and the tingle and the warmth washed over her whole body, there was no going back.

A day later, she was shooting heroin with her boyfriend in the bathroom at his mother's house. Within a week, the couple's heroin habit increased from a tenth of a gram a day to one full gram.

"You use a needle one time, you're done," Arnold warns. "You're hooked."

"The first high — all the other shots will never be like that. You're always chasing that first. It's a never-ending battle of trying to get that high," Arnold says, slicing her hand through the air higher and higher, a zenith that can never be reached.

Not when the batch bought after pawning stolen silver and coins lasts less than a day.

Not when three trips to Indianapolis a day to score increases to five.

Not when the dealer pays for rides up and down Ind. 37 in heroin, or when selling for the dealer gives access to even more product.

Not when the heroin gets mixed with meth to create what's called "a speedball."

Not after the silver 2001 Mitsubishi Eclipse purchased outright after scrimping and saving gets sold for \$200 and two grams, all gone in two days.

At the height of her addiction, Arnold got pulled over by a police officer when she was driving in a rough neighborhood of Indianapolis during a drug pickup.

The cop noticed the track marks on her arms, saw syringes poking out of her purse. He leaned forward: "Do you want this for your life? You're too young to be doing this. What would your parents think?"

When she tells the story now, Arnold starts to cry. She remembers the police officer's kindness, and the weight of her own shame and guilt. If her dad were still alive, he would have been so, so disappointed.

The police officer let her go.

And, 15 minutes later — "What was I doing? Meeting my dealer, getting high in a McDonald's parking lot."

Homeless and estranged from her family, Arnold roamed the streets at night if she couldn't find a couch to crash on. She figured she'd done one thing right: her daughter was safe. No kid deserved a homeless junkie for a mother.

Court hearings for temporary guardianship started in March 2014. By July, the child's paternal grandmother had been granted custody. Court records show Arnold didn't attend the hearings.

"You're not the same Mommy you used to be," her daughter told her. "I miss you."

She was 8 years old.

"I was at the point where I did not care."

Arnold spent her first month of sobriety inside the Monroe County Jail.

Anger got her through withdrawal, and she spewed venom at her probation officer in a hand-written letter.

Arnold had been expected to attend an addictions-treatment appointment at Centerstone, immediately following her daily meeting with Amy Matney, at community corrections. Arnold didn't show; she got high instead.

Within an hour, Matney asked a judge for two warrants for probation violations.

Arnold blamed Matney for requesting the warrants that led to her arrest. Taking jail-issued pencil to lined paper, Arnold let her have it.

Matney's letters in response detailed her unrelenting efforts to find Arnold an open bed at a rehab center.

Arnold wrote her probation officer another letter. She asked for help.

"Amy is the one who believed in me. She's the one who saved my life," Arnold says. "If I wouldn't have gotten arrested, gone to jail, gone to rehab — I could have died. Because I was at the point where I did not care."

The biggest step an addict can take

A large television blasts MTV for an audience of one in the front room of Centerstone's Recovery Engagement Center in downtown Bloomington. It's the week of spring break, and the center lacks the usual bustle of the Friday afternoon Narcotics Anonymous meeting and lunch prepared by volunteers.

Sunlight fills the long hallway of the center as Arnold opens the back door. Health issues and depression have kept her away for months.

She is all magenta and purple hair, deftly wrangling her 5-month-old son and her fiancé's three boys into the center. She's momentarily free of the bulk of the feeding tube, unhooking the equipment before going out.

Arnold carries herself with comfort, ease, confidence. It's like she's home.

In her early months of sobriety, she had been terrified to go to the center for the first time. She feared running into former drug buddies and predatory neighborhood dealers in search of the vulnerable, the easy sell.

What she found was her sober safe place. A place to learn and grow outside of appointments with recovery coaches and counselors.

Then came the desire to help those in need. Arnold became a volunteer.

She ran the front desk, answered phones, alerted the recovery coaches about appointments. She helped prepare the Friday lunch, and welcomed the hungry to the center.

Arnold and a friend organized a celebratory picnic at Cascades for those in recovery. Food, balloons, the works.

She offered care and guidance to those new in recovery. She thrived in responsibility.

“Making the first step, reaching out for help, is the biggest step an addict or alcoholic can take. You just have to walk in there and be willing to start the process,” Arnold says of Centerstone and the Recovery Engagement Center.

She is mindful, present in her sober safe place, seated here where others join in the fellowship and support of NA.

There is no feeding tube equipment to lug around. There is no safe containing prescription opioids. She's not in a hospital bed, or the detox unit at the jail, or the bathroom of her boyfriend's mother's house.

Her fiancé's boys are being mindful in the other room, keeping watch over her 5-month-old son. She hopes to regain custody of her daughter, who is almost 10. She and Jones have a wedding to plan, and a large family to cherish. The relationship with her mother has never been better. She has a strong circle of support.

Maybe she'll go to cosmetology school. Or, become a recovery coach.

She catches herself in a moment, here at her sober safe place.

“This is a huge part of me staying clean. I gotta get out of my depression. I need to be here,” she says. “I can’t talk about it anymore. I need to do it.”