

From monster to miracle: Auburn man overcomes crack addiction, poverty to counsel others off road he traveled



MAY 12, 2014 6:30 AM • [DAVID WILCOX](#) | DAVID.WILCOX@LEE.NET

AUBURN | Derek Titus has a few choice words for himself.

At 10, he was "a black male Cinderella."

At 20, "a drunken dope fiend for a husband."

At 30, "a damn monster."

But it's how the 45-year-old Auburn man describes himself today that brings tears to his eyes and a tremor to his lips: "A hard worker." "Grateful." "A miracle."

Today, Derek is happy. He's training to become a certified alcohol and substance abuse counselor at Confidential Help for Alcohol and Drugs. He's a member of Lakes Church. He's engaged.

That all happened because five years ago Monday, May 5, Derek got clean. Pocking his

road to that moment, however, was a life of poverty, sadness and despair.

'A BLACK MALE CINDERELLA'

Born in 1968, Derek grew up on Pine Street on Syracuse's east side, the middle of five children. It was a "good, tight family," he said.

When he was 6 or 7, the family moved to Westmoreland and East Fayette, which marked a major change of scenery, he said. Among his first memories, a week after the move, was seeing an older man get shot from the front window of his house.

As a boy, Derek wasn't immune to the environment, either.

"My first week there I got jumped," he said. "That was just the way the neighborhood kids got you into the neighborhood."

Derek remained an A-student, hoping to be the first in his family to go to college, and then become an architect. With a laugh he calls himself a nerd — behind him, a Marvel "Avengers"

blanket the color of mixed vegetables lends validity to his words.

Later, his mom and siblings moved to another home about a block away, leaving Derek with his great-grandmother. Many days he'd go to their apartment to clean and do other chores while his mom worked from morning to night. His brothers and sisters, meanwhile, got to go outside and play. Derek endured, hoping to earn his mother's approval — eventually.

"She was real hard on me — probably harder on me, I thought, than the rest, because she just probably didn't like my dad," he said. "I looked just like him — God bless the dead."

At the same time, Derek grew closer to other boys his age in the neighborhood. They all wanted more, he said. Despite being what he'd call well-off, Derek could see that his life didn't quite match what he'd watch on TV. Even at his own school, he said, the children had cooler sneakers.

That's when the resentment surfaced, he said. And at 14, Derek found relief in marijuana. He remembers his first hit vividly: A friend waved him up from the street to an exposed staircase in a half-finished building, where they sat and shared the joint in the cool air of a Syracuse spring.

"When I took that, I knew at that instance that my life was gonna change," he said.

Looking back, Derek said, that joint wasn't a gateway to more drugs, but something of much greater consequence.

"I became part of the dynamic of the neighborhood that everybody forgot. When they talk about a project, that's what it is: a project. 'Let's put all these people in here and see how many kill themselves,'" he said. "And it's not just a project for black people. It's a project all over America."

By the end of the year, Derek left home.

'A DRUNKEN DOPE FIEND'

A cocktail of masculinity, hip-hop fashion and drug abuse pulled Derek deeper into the arms of the neighborhood friends with whom he was now living. He skipped school frequently, failing ninth grade. To fund his habits — flashy clothes, weed and 40-ounces — he'd break into cars.

"We'd rap and dance and all that," he said, "but at the end of the day, it was about who was getting their hustle on."

Derek saw glimpses of the lifestyle's sharper edges, but kept his distance. Cocaine, crack, needles — anything that could hook him hard he stayed away from, he said. Feeling he still had a grip on his drug use, Derek decided to finish high school.

He was kicked out for stealing a teacher's purse, and was sent to the Prescott School. Its stringency served him well. Derek relaxed his drinking and smoking, and started going to school more often than not. Helping stage a production of "A Christmas Carol" was a high point of his renewed scholastic focus, he said.

It didn't last. Derek returned to crime, in more dangerous forms than before: Selling marijuana, carrying a gun. He'd do stints in jail for petty larceny, assault and truancy.

When his mother moved to Buffalo to take a promising new job, "things got real rough for me," Derek said. He at first refused to go with her, feeling at home with his friends. He was soon arrested again, though, and agreed to the move and to finish school in Buffalo as part of a deal to end a five-year probation term.

Within six months of being in Buffalo, Derek was kicked out of the house. He had nowhere to go.

"I slept in buildings that I can't even describe to you. The kind of buildings you ride by in the city and you see all the windows are broken out, with pissy mattresses in the buildings, people in the buildings at night with candlelight, shooting up," Derek said. "Drug bags everywhere."

That was when Derek, at 17, started using crack.

As the drug swallowed him up, his dreams — football, gymnastics, architecture — were snuffed, he said. He kept up appearances, though, asking his sisters to wash his clothes at their mother's house when she wasn't around. He told himself he wasn't like the other residents of the run-down drug den that he, too, called home for almost a year.

Then his girlfriend got pregnant. Sudden fatherhood spurred him to get his GED — but not without feeling even angrier about his life, he said.

"I began to see that life was not a game," he said.

Derek began selling crack and heroin while running with a crew that, he believed, could make him disappear because he had no roots in the Buffalo area. The work landed Derek at Wende Correctional Facility in Alden, where he was serving a two-year term when his first son, Derek Jr., was born. Within months, his girlfriend was pregnant with their second child, Ezekiel Malik.

Derek kept working, becoming a certified nursing assistant and securing an apartment for his family. He self-medicated each day with four or five 40-ounces, a quarter-ounce of weed and, when he could sneak one, a "wooly" — a blunt suffused with crack. Even as his girlfriend gave them a third son, Christopher James, he continued his drug abuse.

"On my days off, I stayed with my sons and I vowed to them to never let them turn out to be like me," he said. "But I didn't realize that at 20, 21 years old with three sons, they mimic everything that you do and they are who you are."

At 22, Derek left his girlfriend and their three sons. Weeks later he'd return, only to find another man sitting on his couch. So Derek went back to Syracuse.

'A DAMN MONSTER'

Back home, Derek hooked up with a crew of old acquaintances for two years of house parties and sticking up drug dealers. They'd graduate to muscle work, beating up gang members for rivals, all while pulling teens into the fold and showing them the ropes — guns, drugs and all.

Once, Derek broke into a home and robbed a young family at gunpoint because he had no money to get high.

"The drugs had took me to a place where I didn't care," he said. "I felt like God had abandoned me at that point. My life began to go downhill faster than I ever thought."

Derek was drinking, smoking weed and using crack every day. He'd wash the few clothes he still owned at a homeless shelter, and sometimes ate there. Other times, he subsisted on crab apples he plucked from trees. Meanwhile, the amount of money Derek was sending back to his sons in Buffalo got smaller and smaller.

He tried a four-day detox, but only managed to stay sober for about six months.

"Show me how to get high correctly," he said of his mindset going into treatment. "Show me how to spend my money to pay my bills and get high."

Soon, Derek had to lay low for one of his crew's attacks, he said. Around that time, he met the woman who'd become his first wife, and had his fourth son, Zaire Quantrell. When she left to serve in the Navy, Derek's drinking ramped up again. He often did so with his father, who had re-entered Derek's life.

"We were doing it all together, except for the needle," Derek said. "He was my get-high buddy, he was my friend — he was my father."

Months after attempting to drop off the map, Derek's crimes caught up with him. He was walking home from Lois's Lounge on Syracuse's south side, through a residential project known as "brick city," when he was suddenly stabbed twice in the left arm with a butcher knife. The blade tore through Derek' muscle and tissue, rendering nerve damage and ultimately requiring 97 stitches and 30 staples to heal. Derek believes the assailant was the man he was avoiding, but he can't be sure.

"That's just how karma is. Maybe he wasn't even the guy," he said. "But all that hurt and harm I was causing — this is one way that it probably came back to me."

Derek's spiral continued. When his wife divorced him and sent military police to his house with the paperwork, he said, he was too drunk to realize he was signing over custody of Zaire.

Among the few things he remembers from the years after the divorce is robbing an elderly woman, who fell down and broke her hip. He found \$7.80 in the purse, he said.

"I couldn't believe I had sunk to such a level," he said. "That was the last straw, where I just stopped caring about life."

Back and forth from Buffalo, Derek's drug use hit an all-time high.

"There was no Derek left. I was going by the stage name 'Doc' at the time. 'The Mad Doc,' like the mad scientist," he said. "They called me the 'Drunk Monk.' I was never caught without a beer in my hand. During the day I tried to maintain, but at night I would turn into this Mr. Hyde."

At 28, Derek went to rehab at The Willows in Syracuse, completing a 28-day term and staying clean for two years. He credits his continued sobriety to Narcotics Anonymous. He was drunk when he attended his first meeting — but it still made a mark. When he got clean, he said, he knew he could return.

Derek also found success working at Kahunaville in then-Carousel Center. Assigned to open a new franchise in Michigan, he'd been unplugged from his support network for two weeks when he was served a Heineken by his manager — who knew Derek was an addict, he said. Seduced by the beads of condensation, the coils of cold air, he gulped the beer down without a second thought.

The next thing he knew, Derek was stealing a friend's truck and scouring foreign neighborhoods for crack, \$5,000 of company money in his pocket. He was fired the next day.

Broke and by himself in Michigan, Derek eventually moved in with his drug dealer. She'd become his newest drug buddy.

"I must have weighed like 100 pounds," he said. "You could see the shoulder blades on her back."

She was eventually let go from her job with a \$50,000 severance package, Derek said — \$30,000 of which the two smoked. They agreed to go to NA, but felt they wouldn't succeed with so much money still in their pockets. They had to go in with nothing, he said.

"We almost died," he said. "We sold every single solitary thing we had, right down to the very last fork."

Derek got clean again, lasting another three years, and his girlfriend followed suit shortly thereafter. By the time he returned to Syracuse, though, he dove back into drugs — again.

'A MIRACLE'

In early 2009, Derek was staying in the house of a Syracuse woman with four children, spending all but \$20 of her paychecks on drugs.

"I'd feel so bad I'd stay in the room and just cuddle in a ball and cry," he said. "I screamed out, 'God, I need your help, please.'"

Three days later, Derek said, God answered.

He was driving some boisterously drunk friends to the convenience store, blunts in their hands and crack in his pocket. A policeman showed up. Cornered and hopeless, Derek pleaded for the officer's help. What he got was a cigarette, he said with a laugh.

Derek was taken to jail. After 22 days there, he was ordered to outpatient treatment at Crouse Hospital. Still getting high by the time he returned to court, Derek was given a new sentence: Dick Van Dyke Addiction Treatment Center in Ovid, by way of Auburn, where he'd be picked up. At an intervention his family gave him some new clothes, and on May 5, 2009, Derek took a bus to Auburn.

He stayed at Dick Van Dyke for 42 days, returning to a healthy weight, and went on to live at GRACE House, Unity House of Cayuga County's residential program for people with chemical dependency problems. Scared to relapse, Derek also attended three meetings a day at Confidential Help for Alcohol and Drugs with counselor Marty Rindfleisch.

"He seemed to really want to stay clean this time," Rindfleisch said.

Derek moved into Chapel House for eight days at the suggestion of Albert Townsend, housing advocate for Options for Independence (now ARISE). Through Options' Housing Locating & Advocacy Program, Townsend then set up Derek with an Auburn apartment.

Members of Narcotics Anonymous furnished it.

"I don't care how many times I got clean before," Derek said tearfully. "This was truly God showing up for me."

He keeps the small second-floor apartment spotless and orderly — just like his mother taught him, he said.

His resolve to stay clean strengthened, Derek was offered a counseling position with CHAD at Rindfleisch's suggestion.

"He's like a beacon for those that struggle," Rindfleisch said. "I'm proud of him."

Townsend also asked Derek to serve on the Options board, which he did for about six months until his CHAD work made it too heavy of a commitment.

"Those guys put their neck out and they do a lot of advocating," Derek said of Options. "That program is needed desperately."

Derek is now on the 11th step of his recovery process: "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God."

He's engaged to a fellow employee at CHAD, and they've set a 2015 wedding date.

He's repairing his relationships with his three oldest sons, enjoying the one he has with his youngest, and just recently found out he has a 19-year-old daughter, Rachel Perry, who came to Auburn to visit him this month.

And his mother lives in the apartment below him.

Derek is rich in relationships, which he stresses through his counseling work with addicts at CHAD and youth at Cayuga Centers. The bonds people make, he believes, are what pull so many into the often overlapping worlds of drugs and poverty.

"It all begins with choice. But what makes a choice so easy is the relationships we have," he said. "If I feel more comfortable with someone who's going to give me what I think I want instead of giving me what I need, I'm going to go with what I want."

"I'm from a place and time where drugs, money, guns are a way of life," he continued. "I'm here to tell you that there's a new way of life."

The numbers behind the story

According to a [2010 report](#) by the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 12.3 percent of people ages 12 and older who live in poverty (3.7 million)

needed substance use treatment within the past year.

Of those people, 17.9 percent (663,000) received it.