

“Steppin’ Into My Shoes”

By the ReEntry Theatre Program

A play for the radio

Episode 2: Hot Topics

Jo Louis: Hello and welcome to “Steppin’ Into My Shoes,” a new radio play created by Civic Ensemble’s ReEntry Theatre Program in collaboration with College Initiative Upstate. This play is based on the oral history interviews conducted with people who have experienced incarceration, court involvement, or drug rehabilitation.

This week’s episode, the second of three parts of this play, explores experiences with substance abuse, recovery and harm reduction through the lens of a fictionalized interview show called Hot Topics. One more note to our listeners: some of the stories you’ll hear depict scenes of drug and alcohol use, and domestic violence, and may not be appropriate for all audiences.

Theme Song

Michelle: Welcome back to another episode of Hot Topics! My name is Michelle, and today we have some amazing guests with us: Michael, Lyle, Briana, Paige, Aiden, Maya, and Milton to talk about their experiences with substance abuse and recovery right here in Tompkins County.

Michael, you yourself have been a drug user throughout your life and are currently working in the field helping others navigate the treatment options available to them. Can you tell us about the most common paths?

Michael: Thank you for that, Michelle. I am honored to be here today. First off, we have what most people think of immediately which is abstinence. Abstinence is defined by abstaining from all substances. Not everyone who is practicing sobriety from their drug of choice is abstinent but everyone has to make that choice for themselves. Other options include MAT, which is short for medication assisted treatment. MAT involves having a medical prescription for a drug that helps with withdrawal symptoms, helps people function with day to day life, while curbing cravings. Examples include Methadone, Suboxone, and Vivitrol.

On the other end of the spectrum from abstinence is Harm Reduction, which is what I advocate the most for. Harm reduction is designed to meet people where they are at and help them make choices, regardless of if they want to continue using or get treatment. Something that ultimately provides them with the best quality of life.

Michelle: Thank you for that overview, Michael. We have several guests today that have chosen abstinence and sobriety as their path. Lyle, you specifically were attending a 12-step program, can you talk more about that and choosing to become sober?

Lyle: Yeah, the first day of sobriety, that was it for me. The day that happened I said, "I don't know if I can ever drink again." I haven't turned back to drinking, I knew I couldn't keep drinking like I was. I started thinking about my life and the future and my partner wasn't having it. Man, alcohol. At this time I was 39, I believe. Alcohol wasn't doing it for me anymore. My dad had stopped drinking abruptly too, really fast one day, all of a sudden. I started going to AA in a new way.

A good thing that came with the beginning of my sobriety is the ReEntry Theatre Program, which has helped me get to where I am today. I got into the ReEntry Program very early in my sobriety which was held at Day Reporting, taught by Sarah for people re-entering society and doing some theater stuff. Not much longer after my sobriety, we started to make a play. The play took up a lot of my time. It took months and months and hours and hours of time and working helped me in the beginning stages of my sobriety.

Michael: I'd like to chime in if that's okay, Michelle.

Michelle: Of course, Michael, take it away!

Michael: I think it's incredible that you were able to stop cold turkey. Not everyone can go down that route and be successful in maintaining abstinence. I actually started out in AA before I became part of the Harm Reduction movement. Lyle brings up the importance of support networks during early recovery. Programs such as 12 step groups like AA, NA, GA, SA, Smart Recovery as well as the ReEntry Theatre Program, provide a community and safe space to be

vulnerable and to share without judgement. It's so easy to feel alone and isolated when trying to make active changes in your life.

Michelle: Thank you for sharing, Lyle and Michael. On that very subject, I'd like to invite Aiden to talk about the period of isolation he was in during early recovery and decided to make the hard choice to cut off many of his friends.

Aiden: Yeah. I mean, there were lifestyle changes that I thought I needed to make. The people that I called my friends at the time were obviously no good for me. So cutting those friends off took me a long time to do. You're going through a hard time. How could you not want to have friends around at that time? But then at the same time to realize that the people that you call your friends at that very moment are the type of people who condone the behavior that you're doing, you can't really have them around. They're not good for you. That was a difficult time for me to realize that maybe I truly was alone, that maybe there was no one else out there that I knew who wanted to do good for me- wanted to do good by me- and didn't want to drag me down into their BS. You know, I did a lot for those people. They did a lot for me, and I'm thankful for them being my friends at the time, but I don't think I could ever go back to that.

So yeah, it was like this dual feeling of well, I'm turning my back on the people that I'm friends with now. And the people that potentially would be good influences on me are basically turning their backs on me at this point because we're 19, 20 years old. Their parents are telling them, "Stay away from that kid. He's bad news."

So it was a very, very emotionally challenging time for me to feel like I was alone. That I was under the thumb of the law, that everybody was always watching me, each and every second. Basically, I thought I had missed my shot at a successful life. Thinking like that over time, my demeanor really soured. I didn't really think there ever was going to be a light at the end of the tunnel. I just thought, "I'm on probation now, I'm going to be a felon for the rest of my life."

I thought, "There's no life for me outside of this now."

Michelle: Wow, thank you for sharing that Aiden. The realization of being alone sometimes can make or break someone in their early recovery. One of our guests, Briana, had a rude awakening during her detox experience that motivated her to make drastic changes to keep her loved ones near.

Briana: Thank you, Michelle. When I went to detox, it was a switch for me. I woke up and my kids weren't there. Nobody was there. Just me and a room with a cot and a television. I never wanted to feel that again and that's what my plan is, to never put myself in that type of situation, and most importantly, learn to feel. That's a lot of it. Nobody wants to feel pain, and to lose your husband is not easy, and not when you have two kids that need him as well. When I became sober, that's when things started to change for the good. Everybody always says, "Sobriety is great." It's not sobriety that was great for me. It was focusing, understanding, being human and crying and feeling. I guess that was what I was trying to do, close off my feelings by using drugs.

Milton: When I hear stories like Aiden and Briana's, it gets me riled up. People shouldn't be pushed into isolation and punished into traditional treatment options. I have some very embittered feelings about traditional treatment. Very embittered. I wasn't ashamed of being a drug user. I have never been ashamed of who and what I am.

I saw what was happening to people around me including myself, and I used to think that the people in treatment who were always complaining were just full of it. I would think, "C'mon, just get your act together."

Then I started experiencing the same problems they were complaining about. We were getting victimized for no reason. I was complying with my treatment plan and I didn't even fail a single urine test. So it rang a bell in my head: We're told we have an Opioid Use Disorder but I'm not being treated like I have a life threatening disease. Instead the counselors make me feel like an immoral piece of crap. That's what they're doing. How can I get my life together if I have to fight for the actual services I need? Why is the treatment center making this more difficult for me? I'm already battling my addiction! We're called an alcoholic or an addict, and it gets

programmed into us. I'm nothing more than an addict to them. We're told the first step is admitting we're powerless over our drug of choice. This admission is supposed to give us a sense of freedom. And for some people it does but for many of us, it leaves us with an overwhelming sense of guilt and shame.

Michelle: Thank you, Briana and Milton for sharing. We are going to take a break.

(STATION BREAK): Hot Topics is in collaboration with Civic Ensemble's ReEntry Theatre Program. Do you have a love of theater? I've been performing since I could walk. What's great about ReEntry is that you don't need experience to participate. We welcome all who have experienced incarceration, drug treatment or any sort of court involvement. You will have a blast writing plays, performing, and playing theater games while building a better community for all. To learn more go to civicensemble.org, because theater is everyone's birthright.

Michelle: Welcome back. Most people are introduced to the outpatient and inpatient drug services through parole and probation. For most people being punished for using doesn't make people adopt a lifestyle of abstinence. Lyle and Paige, can you tell the audience about your experiences with substance abuse while on probation?

Lyle: Well, my sobriety definitely had nothing to do with the courts because when I was on probation, I was still drinking. I was doing the seven o'clock AA meeting just so I could sit in there, be warm and have a cup of coffee before the Mobil would sell me a beer at eight o'clock. My girlfriend was in the system too, on drug court herself. I'd be sober for 10 days, knowing a piss test might come, get the piss test and then be back to drinking, and going to AA, and over and over again.

Paige: I've been on probation twice. The first time, it wasn't that bad, because it was a joke. My first experience with Probation was a slap on the hand. It's not that my Probation Officer wasn't a good Probation Officer, because he was. But I totally lied. I totally lied my booty off. I wasn't truthful about anything. I went, and I showed up, and I said all the good things, and I acted all the good ways, and that was it. I went on about my business. I don't think I took it seriously at

all. That's probably why I ended up doing the same thing again. But the second time was different.

The second time it was a whole different ball game, because now it's a felony. It's a little different when it's a felony, and it's a little different when you're not following the rules. So I started out the second time, kind of the way I did the first. It didn't end well in my favor. I kept drinking and using and I kept doing all the stuff that you're not supposed to do. Then I ended up in Drug Court, which is a whole different ball game, too. I had to make the decision to either do Drug Court or go to prison for one to four years.

I chose Drug Court. Now I'm no longer just going in once a week to report, now I had to call a number every morning to see if I had to give a piss test. I also had to go to AA meetings three times a week, fill out sober support sheets to turn into my PO which basically proved that I went to the meeting. I had to participate in individual and group substance abuse counseling as well as mental health counseling. On top of it all, I had to go in front of the judge assigned to drug court every other week.

I didn't have a whole lot of time to decide. But I knew that I didn't want to go to prison. I knew that I didn't want to leave my daughter. I knew that being locked up just wasn't going to work for me. So I was willing to do anything. That's exactly what I did.

Briana: I'm sorry, I'm going to be completely honest that just isn't how things went down for me. I ended up getting into some trouble with the law, driving offenses or whatever. I knew some of the higher ups in town from my past - Judges, things like that. They took an interest in me, a recently widowed woman with two sons. They could see that I was not at my best. They knew I was on drugs, and thankfully, they didn't attack me. I was treated with dignity. They didn't take my children. They helped me. They put me in a detox program. I did five days of detox and I've been sober ever since which I'm so grateful for.

Maya: I wish that was my experience. It was extremely hard for me because they took my child, so at first I didn't know what to do. I was in complete shock. I just didn't want to live, honestly. I just wanted to use even more. And then they stick you in this courtroom with a bunch of other

people that also had their kids taken from them. It took us about a year and a half for my husband and I to get our child back completely. It was rough.

Michelle: Let's go ahead and take another break.

(STATION BREAK): Hot topics is in collaboration with College Initiative Upstate. CIU helps those who are formerly incarcerated and now CIU is working with those who are going to Cayuga Addiction and Recovery Services or Alcohol and Drug Council for addiction treatment. Worried about student loans that are in default? CIU helps you navigate the process. Research shows education is key to breaking the cycle. Once you get an associate degree the chance of re-offending drops to a staggering 13.7% and continues to drop as you go further in your education. So what are you waiting for? To learn more go to CIUtompkins.org

Michelle: Welcome back. Maya, if you could change anything about Drug Court what would it be?

Maya: Oh, man. I think we need a total overhaul. We should've seen this judge with just our families, not in front of a bunch of other people going through their own stuff. Putting us all together in that courtroom and making us all have to explain our problems was humiliating. If you weren't on a certain path, you were made to feel less than. I felt so alone even though I was in a room full of people. It should've been more personal.

Also, the drug tests sometimes were false. I had MDMA come up in my system and they took my visits away for two weeks. I had it retested, and the test came back negative. Those two weeks, I couldn't see my child because of a drug that was never in my system. How dare you guys. I don't know.

Also, yanking the child out of the home and then trying to transition them back into the same home is such a hopeless and frustrating experience. I watched it so many times with so many different families. Usually the options are to leave the kids with their mother or put them somewhere else. It isn't fair to the child to be taken away for something as silly as their parent testing positive for pot. Now she has to wait 40 days for the pot to get out of her system and is

deemed an unsuitable mother. It's BS. Her child is fed, dressed, and loved. She can't have a visit because she still has pot in her system? They can see the THC levels dropping in her drug tests but that isn't enough.

Michael: The stories we are hearing about drug court right now are echoed by so many of the clients I work with. Drug Court is rooted in using punishment as a way of controlling the behaviors of drug users. Advocates like myself are pushing for legislation that incorporates Harm Reduction into drug court programs.

Michelle: Michael, can you explain a little more to our audience about Harm Reduction?

Michael: Harm Reduction is rooted in the principle of meeting people where they're at and finding the best quality of life for both the individual and the community. Syringe exchanges are the cornerstone of the Harm Reduction movement. It benefits drug users to have a syringe exchange available to bring used syringes to and to be able to get new, clean syringes. And the community appreciates not having dirty syringes lying around. This cuts down on communicable diseases being transferred from injectable drug users to community members. Harm Reduction agencies also provide other resources such as condoms, safe sex education, STI testing and treatment. All of these services are provided anonymously. I think at the end of the day, everyone needs to find that best quality of life for themselves, and be okay with it, and just continue to be functional instead of shaming themselves for relapsing or continuing to use.

Harm Reduction agencies help guide people to the treatment option that suits them best. Many clients choose a form of MAT. Sometimes people choose to get on Methadone and are able to stay abstinent from heroin. Other people take Methadone, continue to use, and try to keep moving ahead and just be functional. It may not mean a 9 to 5 job or what other people see as successful but they have a place to rest their head and enough to survive. That might be as good as it's going to get for them, and that's okay. It doesn't mean that's a bad life. Everyone's idea of the "best quality of life" is different. I'm like, "Just do your thing."

Milton: We all know that people do what people do. At Harm Reduction agencies, there's never any judgment about any kind of relapses, relapses in like behavior or relapses in alcohol or drug

use or whatever. They try to see what they can do to help rather than, "Well, if you're going to do that, you can't come here, we can't provide you with services" kind of stuff. And I think that's key in all outreach styles: meeting people where they're at and not making any demands of them, just asking them what you can do to help them today.

Michelle: Wow, unfortunately, it looks like we are out of time. Thank you all so much for taking the time to come to the studio and educate and discuss these hard but prominent issues in our community.

Jo Louis: You've been listening to "Steppin' Into My Shoes" by Civic Ensemble's ReEntry Theatre Program. This week's episode featured the voices of Leroy Barrett, Brian Briggs, Jo Louis Hallback, Amy Heffron, Pam Lackner, Latoya Peterson, Cassandra Ponton, and A.C. Sidle.

This play was directed by Gabriella da Silva Carr and Julia Taylor. Our Producer is Julia Taylor. We developed this play in collaboration with College Initiative Upstate, including Benay Rubenstein. Our program intern was Tilda Wilson. Sound was designed by Rudy Gerson and the audio engineer was Nate Richardson of REP Studio. The theme song was created by Jo-Louis Hallback, A.C. Sidle, and Brennen Feint.

To support the ongoing work of Civic Ensemble's ReEntry Theatre Program, visit www.civicensemble.org and click the donate button. Thanks for listening.