

Behind drugs, stories of pain

Dan Rodricks

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The life and death of Nicole Sesker - stepdaughter of Baltimore's previous police commissioner, drug addict and homicide victim - emerges now as the central image from a tragic tableau 40 years in the making, a vast crowd scene with thousands of weary faces.

Sesker's death stands out to some because of its irony: Her stepfather was Leonard Hamm. But most who know better, who know that addiction and alcoholism infests the best of families, look past that and see something familiar: the end of a life of pain.

"It's the pain," said Paul Martin, a counselor at the Baltimore Station, a transitional shelter for men in South Baltimore. I had asked Martin to explain the prevalence of heroin addiction here over the past four decades. "It's what takes away your pain and suffering. If it was paint chips that worked, it would be paint chips that we abuse."

Someone once tried to quantify the amount of pain-relief sought daily in Baltimore. Ten years ago, it was estimated that the city had a heroin-cocaine addic-

tion base of about 65,000 residents. But no one could verify that number or even identify its original source. Since then, surveys of experts and an examination of records suggested that 40,000 might be a better number - roughly one out of every 16 Baltimoreans. Baltimore Substance Abuse Systems, the central authority for treatment funding in the city, says it serves 23,000 addicts annually. (BSAS also says the city has a "substantial unmet need" for treatment and that funding has been cut during the past four years.)

I've had hundreds of conversations about drug addiction here, in an effort to understand its scope and its grip. Why did so many get into heroin, then crack? Why is the disease so chronic? Most crime is related to drugs. The prisons and detention centers are full and expanding. There aren't enough treatment beds. Baltimore Station, in an old firehouse on West Street, is doubling its size to keep up with demand for housing and for addictions and vocational counseling.

Friday evening, after supper with the residents there, I asked Paul Martin about Baltimore's epoch of drug addiction. He's 49 years old and has lived through all of it. A former resident of Baltimore Station and a recovering addict, Martin serves as a counselor and a manager of the shelter. A kitchen-trained chef, he wants to develop a catering business

with the residents in the next few years as the shelter grows. (They'll have a booth at Artscape next month and sell a jerk chicken "recession-buster" special for \$7 a plate, plus beverage.) He is a big, eloquent man with a powerful story. This is a good time of his life - he just received his associate's degree from Baltimore City Community College, one of four former residents who received degrees this spring.

I asked Martin about the pain that he'd mentioned. What's it all about?

"Our pain is about our dreams," Martin said. "It's a painful process not to be able to achieve your dreams. I had a vision of myself as rich and good, top of the world, draped in fur coats. But when reality sets in - that reality where I see myself cold and hungry and dressed in rags, and not as I've seen myself in my dreams - it's painful.

"When you're a young man and your dreams go away - only one present under the tree - well, that's when I go sell a bag of weed. I saw people in the subculture getting it, getting money, and I wanted what they had."

He spent 33 years in the life. Nowadays, clean and clear-headed, he tries to get others to look inside themselves, understand their pain and take responsibility for their lives. "We think we lost our home, lost our car. We think we lost our wives to another man," Martin said. "We didn't lose those things. We gave them up, gave them away. You have to take responsibility for that." I asked Martin about his boyhood.

Grew up in lower Park Heights, he said. Never knew his father. Birth mother gave him up, and a couple adopted him. And his adoptive father killed his adoptive mother? "What?"

Martin's tone changed here, into something like somber, as I listened to his story. It was 1963, he said. His adoptive father shot his adoptive mother as she sat in a car, a white Chevy Bel Air, in front of a beauty shop.

Martin can still recall and demonstrate the rhythm of the shots.

"Where were you at the time?" I asked.

"Sitting on my adoptive mother's lap," he said. "I was 5 years old."

I have heard stories like this before. Some kind of violent tragedy seems to be a common fact of life among the addicted. So is poverty. So is unemployment, tied directly into the loss of manufacturing jobs over the last 40 years. Fatherlessness comes up, too. Dropping out of school. Getting into the juvenile system. You hear these things a lot.

It's a lot of pain, a lot to overcome.

Not an excuse. Just an explanation.

"I see so much of me in the people I serve here now," Martin said of the men who live at Baltimore Station. The walls on both sides of the first floor, where the men dine, are covered with large mirrors. The men see themselves frequently that way, Martin said, and they're reminded that the answer to their problems - to their pain - rests within.



Recovery Starts Here

Random Rodricks

Dan Rodricks' blog from baltimoresun.com

Recovering and running

Among the men I met Friday night at the Baltimore Station was a fellow named Neville Anderson, a resident there who loves to run. He ran in yesterday's 5K, part of the African-American Heritage Festival, and Susan Pompa, a staffer at Baltimore Station, reports that Anderson finished fourth in the race.

"Neville ran a hell of a race," she says. "And it was hot out there. It is the first race he ran in four years. He was pleased with his endurance, took a wrong turn, which he felt was where he might've lost his edge, but thought that maybe it was more important for the young guy in front of him to come in third. He told me that he feels he's back and will be running in the 6K at the Dundalk Heritage Race on the 4th of July."

Pompa wrote and shared this profile of Anderson:

For years, Neville was a winning marathon runner. He got used to coming in first place at school, then winning for years after, at local, regional, statewide and national 5K,

10K and long-distance marathon races. For a while, he did so well he was able to make a living from the prize money he received, and often received money from sponsors all across the country. Neville worked at a Baltimore running store and sold running apparel to the many people with whom he raced. He pretty much stayed to himself, but then started using drugs, spending all his money, and eventually losing everything, even where he was living.

At that point he reached out for help, and his cousin came through for him and directed him to The Baltimore Station. After three days of detox, Neville arrived at the front door of The Station.

According to Neville, counselor Paul Martin took him under his wing from the start and immediately helped him navigate his way through bureaucratic red tape to get some health benefits, food stamps and other basic necessities to make his way back. "The program is all about the give-back," Neville says. "It is a lot like school to me. I am

learning something everyday, and you only get out of it, what you put into it."

"I've been here now for 17 months, and I have seen guys come and go. Some can't take it, and aren't really ready to make the change. For me, I am hungry for the information I am getting. I am learning which way to turn when things get rough. The knowledge makes me stronger, and gives me power in my own life," he says. "At The Station you come in close contact with so many different personalities every day. I have learned how to deal with conflicts by realizing we are all in this together."

Neville has four sons, ages 12 through 22. One of his sons, a former basketball player, ran into trouble with drugs and got sentenced to two years in jail. Neville wants to invite him to The Station to talk to the guys, to learn from the counselors. "I would love for him to get on track and start changing his life, too. The Station does a lot of work in Youth Prevention Programs. The residents get the opportu-

nity to talk one-on-one with young teens and students who come by the station to volunteer."

He's been running close to 10 miles a day, and is grateful for the area he is now in, and the places he can run...to the top of Federal Hill with a view of the Baltimore skyline, around the perimeter of the Inner Harbor, and then down to the tip of Fort McHenry.

Though running always came easy to him, he will admit that in the past he has worked hard to win. "You can't win, without the work, and it's the same here at The Station," Neville says. "I enjoy training as much as the race, but there is nothing like the feeling you get after you win the race. Early on, though, I realized that there is no difference between the people in the back of the race and the ones that come in first. Everyone is working hard, to do their best with what they have." Just like here at The Station, we all make each other stronger, even through the good and the bad.



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