

Author chronicles son's spiral into addiction

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Abstract:

"Beautiful Boy" exposed the toll Nic's drug addiction took on his family, Sheff said Monday as he made the first of four book festival appearances. The book is a memoir of the family's experiences during the decade Nic was addicted to heroin, methamphetamine and other drugs.

Full text:

We have to look deeper than the substance abuse if we want to address addiction.

That's the central message author David Sheff is conveying in his stops in the Fox Cities this week. His book, "Beautiful Boy: A Father's Journey Through His Son's Addiction," is the 2016 Fox Cities Reads book and Sheff is a featured presenter at the week-long Fox Cities Book Festival, which opened Monday.

"Don't think as much about drugs as you think about why people use them, why kids use them," said Sheff, whose son, Nic, struggled with drug addiction for 10 years. "And when you do that, then you start to look at all the reasons, all the things around our kids that could influence them."

"Beautiful Boy" exposed the toll Nic's drug addiction took on his family, Sheff said Monday as he made the first of four book festival appearances. The book is a memoir of the family's experiences during the decade Nic was addicted to heroin, methamphetamine and other drugs.

Sheff also is the author of "Clean: Overcoming Addiction and Ending America's Greatest Tragedy," billed as "a myth-shattering look at drug abuse."

Sheff spoke with USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin before his speech Monday at the University of Wisconsin-Fox Valley, where he presented "Understanding Drug Use: Ending America's Greatest Tragedy."

It's an issue that invades -- and tears apart -- more lives than Sheff realized when he first started writing about his family's experience with addiction. It was a time Sheff describes as profoundly difficult and isolating, fearing both his son's death and the judgment that he believed would come with reaching out for support from the people around them.

From the outside, Nic looked just fine -- a great student and athlete, all signs suggesting to his parents that he's OK. Sheff thought he and his son could talk about everything. He was devastated to find out that Nic was smoking marijuana at 12 years old. Sheff was reassured by Nic's teachers and the school counselor that it was normal for kids to experiment.

And he wanted to believe them.

"That was the beginning of 10 years of hell, when Nic's drug use escalated and pretty soon it wasn't just pot; it was alcohol, it was heroin, methamphetamine and pills, and everything you can imagine," Sheff said.

When Nic talks about why he used, Sheff said, it wasn't really because of peer pressure or out of a desire to know how it felt to be high. When Nic got high for the first time, the anxiety he had lived with melted away, Sheff said. He kept going because he wanted more of that relief.

Nic was later diagnosed with depression and bipolar disorder, Sheff said.

"If Nic had been treated as a child, as a teenager for his depression and anxiety, bipolar, whatever it was, effectively, I mean, who knows, he still may have had drug problems, but I can't help thinking, and he doesn't think that it ever would have escalated to the point that it's at now," he said.

There are other risk factors, too, Sheff said.

Nic has now been clean for almost seven years, a "miracle, given where he was," Sheff said.

Nic has also written two memoirs about his experience with addiction. Reading Nic's books, "Tweak: Growing Up on Methamphetamines" and "We All Fall Down: Living with Addiction," was heartbreaking for his father.

What Nic had gone through was far worse, far darker than Sheff had imagined.

It was a reminder of how lucky they were that Nic had survived given how many times he could have died. It also helped Sheff understand how his son went from caring and moral to seemingly unconcerned about what his drug abuse was doing to his family.

"When I read his book, I saw it wasn't that he was out there having fun being like this selfish teenager," Sheff said. "He was in hell. He was just in real trouble and he was suffering. And it made me understand more about what it means to be addicted, that it wasn't like he was some bad person who had made these bad choices and was selfish. It was that he had a problem that was way, way, way bigger than anything he could control."

Sheff encourages looking at addiction as a disease instead of a moral failing and addressing the underlying causes that push kids toward drugs.

If parents think there's a problem, there probably is, he said. And they should continue pushing to get help for their children.

He told the audience at UWFox that when Nic became addicted, his family kept it a secret, and while they weren't talking about it, it got worse. Although being open doesn't solve the problem, it does help people figure out what to do.

It matters that society sees addiction as a disease instead of a moral failing, he said, because when people are ill they need treatment. Insurance companies, he said, will pay for diseases. They will not pay for bad choices. Still, Sheff said, he remains hopeful because people are getting educated about addiction and understanding that it's a disease. That shift in mindset translates into support for research that will lead to breakthroughs, he said.

Most parents, he said, don't know what to do or where to start when their children get addicted. Many have experiences like his, he said.

He read from letters he's received, one from a mother whose son died of a heroin overdose.

"Some days, the pain is so unbearable that I don't think I'll make it," she wrote.

Sheff also will present at 10 a.m. today at the Appleton Public Library and 1 p.m. today at Smith Public Library in Menasha.

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