

# Life After Meth—A Journey of Addiction and Recovery

BY DOUGLAS WILSON “WIL” MILLER

In the summer of 1997 at the age of 35, I fell in love. That relationship exposed me to many new things. Unfortunately, one of them was methamphetamine.

I didn't know a lot about meth the first time I tried it. It wasn't a common drug where I was from. I knew it was a stimulant and I knew it was illegal. And although I had been employed as a prosecutor in New York City and Seattle for the preceding nine years, I had always been a vocal opponent of the “War on Drugs” and refused to handle drug cases because of it. That left a dangerous void in my knowledge of meth.

From the very first time I tried meth, I loved it. Nothing had ever made me feel as happy or alive or confident as meth did. That's because no natural experience can make your brain produce dopamine like meth can. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that makes you experience pleasure. Normally there are about 100 units of dopamine in the pleasure centers of your brain; when you have sex, those levels double up to around 200 units. Cocaine can make your dopamine levels go up to 350 units and keep them there for over an hour. That's why cocaine is so addictive. But when you use meth, your dopamine levels shoot up to 1,250 units and you stay high for up to 12 hours. At the same time your dopamine levels are spiking, meth is also reducing blood flow to your frontal lobes, hobbling that section of your brain that helps you make good and responsible decisions. It's a dangerous combination—a perfect storm of addiction.

## Barreling Towards Addiction

By the third time I tried meth, I knew I wasn't going to stop, and soon what started



Photo courtesy of Lana M. Wilson Photography

as a weekend ritual of getting high quickly snowballed into extended periods of use followed by debilitating periods of withdrawal. Meth withdrawal can leave you feeling impossibly weak, apathetic, and depressed, sometimes for days. You eat and sleep uncontrollably and sometimes experience crying jags or bouts of paranoia for no reason. It can make you feel like you're losing your mind.

By December 1997 I couldn't take it anymore. I became an addicted, daily substance user just to avoid withdrawal. Suddenly, for the first time in my career, I started showing up late to work. I couldn't stay organized anymore. I was losing my

temper for no reason and being really rude to some of the defense attorneys.

Many people believe it's easy to figure out when someone is using meth by their violent or erratic behavior, but that's a myth. Like any drug, individual responses to meth vary widely. Just as some alcoholics can maintain the appearance of sobriety with relatively high blood-alcohol levels, many meth addicts can do the same with meth. In many ways, my meth-influenced behavior was not unlike the behavior of many trial attorneys who are short-tempered and stressed out, and for the most part it went unnoticed.

Being a prosecutor certainly made my

addiction much more complicated. I was overwhelmed with feelings of guilt and hypocrisy. And although I knew I desperately needed help, I had no idea where I could get it without losing my job.

And I really didn't want to lose my job. I loved being a trial attorney and a victims' advocate. After graduating from Duke Law in 1988, I started my career in the Brooklyn DA's Office, where I focused on prosecuting sex crimes. Three years later, I took a job as a trial attorney and supervisor in the Special Victims Bureau in the Queens DA's Office. Then in 1995 I moved to Seattle to work for Norm Maleng as a King County deputy prosecutor.

Being a prosecutor was all I had ever done. I was also really good at it. In nine years of trying cases back-to-back, I rarely lost. Trial work felt completely natural to me—like the thing I was born to do.

### Caught at the Courthouse

That all ended one day in March 1998, three months into my addiction, when a security guard at the King County Courthouse asked me to open my briefcase, which had just gone through the x-ray machine. It was a common request; I frequently had my briefcase searched when entering the courthouse. Only this time, inside there was an Altoids tin containing drugs and drug paraphernalia—I recognized the Altoids tin. It belonged to me and my significant other. But I had no idea why it was in my briefcase, where it would so obviously be found by security.

In an instant, I saw my life crumble before my eyes. I was about to lose everything: my job, my friends, and my reputation. I denied the drugs were mine, but I knew it didn't matter. The damage was done. A few days later, I resigned my job and a special prosecutor was appointed to handle the investigation.

As I saw it, I had two choices at that point: 1) stop using meth and face reality, or 2) keep using a drug that made me insanely happy, no matter how bad my life became. I knew if I kept using meth there was a good chance it would eventually kill me, but that was no longer a reason *not* to use it. My life already felt like it was over. I wanted it to be over.

But I had a different problem now. Snorting meth no longer put enough of the drug into my bloodstream to make its

magic work. I needed to get a lot more in me, a lot faster. So I started injecting it. At \$25 a shot, that was expensive, and within a few weeks I was completely broke. Not surprisingly, that's also when my relationship ended. Once my significant other was gone, I felt completely lost.

All my former friends were prosecutors who couldn't have any contact with me. All I had left was meth. However, I was still an experienced criminal attorney—one who now knew dozens of meth addicts, most of whom desperately needed representation from a lawyer they could trust. You're probably thinking, "You were still able to practice? Didn't the Washington Supreme Court suspend you?" No, they didn't. Because I had yet to be charged with any crime.

When word went out among the meth addicts in Seattle that I was going to start practicing criminal law again, they quickly became my client base and my friends. They almost never had money, but they almost always had meth. My addiction found a way to survive.

Propped up by the chemically induced confidence of meth, I walked back into the King County Courthouse in May 1998, three months after resigning my job, and started my career as a criminal defense attorney. Much to my surprise, I loved it just as much as I loved being a prosecutor. That's when I realized I might still have a future. I wanted to live, but only if I could stop using meth.

### The Public Learns My Name

So I made a plan: I'd save up enough money to pay for rehab and get my mortgage current, then block out enough time in my schedule to go. It may not have been realistic, but it was a huge improvement over my earlier plan of just using meth until it killed me. Unfortunately, my plan got interrupted when the special prosecutor handling the courthouse incident decided *not* to charge me with drug possession. His decision provoked an angry backlash of editorials and newspaper articles claiming preferential treatment by one prosecutor for another—editorials and articles that named me publicly for the first time as the person involved. I'm not sure why I wasn't charged; in retrospect, I really wish I had been. If I had, my case would likely have gone to drug court, where I would have gotten the kind of life-saving intervention I desperately needed.

That burst of publicity quickly scared off all my paying clients. No one wanted to hire me. Soon I started getting notices from my mortgage lender threatening me with foreclosure, and then my phone and utilities were turned off. Even though I was now no longer facing potential drug charges, my life kept getting worse and worse. That's when I finally gave up trying to save myself.

About a month later, in December 1998—a year into my addiction—my ex started calling me again. He said he needed my help getting some meth for a friend of his. He told me if I could finance the deal, we could split the profit. It didn't take a lot of convincing at that point: I could no longer see any future, and like most meth addicts, it wasn't the first time I had done something like this. My ex set up the initial meeting and I obtained the drugs. Over the course of the next two months, I sold drugs to his friend three times.

On February 16, 1999, the fourth time I was supposed to sell his friend drugs, the friend showed up at my house with a SWAT team, a battering ram, and a KOMO 4 News team to film my arrest live on television. It turned out the "friend" was an undercover cop and my ex was making money setting me up for the police.

Well, that was the luckiest thing that ever happened to me. It was the only intervention I was ever going to get, and it started the chain reaction of events that eventually saved my life. Only it didn't happen quickly. After my arrest, I used my knowledge of the criminal justice system to stall my trial for over a year and a half. I still had my license to practice law, but it was almost impossible for me to concentrate on the little bit of work I had. It was during this time between my arrest and my trial that I made my first serious attempt at drug rehab.

### Rehab and Picking Up Where You Left Off

There are two basic schools of drug recovery programs. One is the 12-step approach, which uses a person's faith in God, or a "higher power," to help recover from addiction. The other approach is based on cognitive behavioral therapy—a school of psychology that employs a variety of techniques to help a person understand their addictive behavior and quit using. My first rehab was based exclusively on the 12-step model. I'm a huge fan of the 12-step

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program; I’ve seen it help a lot of people, and I have witnessed firsthand the amazing power of faith.

But I am also a lifelong atheist. So “faith” just isn’t one of the tools in my toolbox. At rehab I openly questioned the appropriateness—for me—of a “faith-based” or “spiritual” recovery program. After ten days of arguing, I was told by the facility director that I was in the wrong place and that I needed to leave. I returned to Seattle and stayed clean for a few months, but by late autumn of 1999, I relapsed with a vengeance. It was during that first major relapse that I learned the truth of one of many valuable sayings taught to me by the 12-step program: “You pick up where you left off.” What does that mean? That means when you’re dealing with addiction, and you stop using your drug of choice for a while, then relapse, you don’t get to go back to the feelings you had during the first few fun times you used. The drug won’t do that neat little trick for you anymore. Instead, you go right back to the crappy feelings you had just before you quit.

With chronic meth use, you reach a point where the drug no longer makes you feel good, because you have literally worked the dopamine-producing cells in your brain to death. They’re gone. The meth still gives you an adrenaline rush, but now the drug starts to make you crazy—paranoid, delusional, or severely ADD. But you know that if you stop using meth, you’ll become incredibly weak and depressed. So every day you use, you’re choosing between being crazy and being depressed.

When I relapsed, I became really angry, distracted, and convinced everyone was out to get me. My law practice was in shambles. It was impossible for me to be an effective advocate when I couldn’t even predict when I’d be awake. Even with planning, alarm clocks, and the best of intentions, I missed court dates and important appointments because I had stayed awake for too many days, run out of meth, and fallen unconscious. The judges and prosecutors were completely fed up with my behavior—and

with good reason. It was obvious to everyone I had relapsed and that I should no longer be practicing law.

I continued to use meth right through my trial in July 2000. I wasn’t surprised when I got convicted. I expected it. That’s when the Washington Supreme Court finally disbarred me.

Even after my conviction, I managed to stay out of custody while my case was on appeal. I was homeless at that point and living on the couches of other drug addicts all over Seattle. That’s when I finally hit my rock bottom. I knew that, compared to where I was at that moment, prison was going to be a step up for me—at least in prison I’d have a bed, clean clothes, and regular meals. Only I was determined not to go to prison addicted. So I made a new plan to get clean—a much more realistic plan.

I got myself into a state-funded rehab (this time based on the cognitive behavioral therapy model of recovery), moved into clean and sober housing, and found work as a housekeeper at a Victorian bed and breakfast on Seattle’s Capitol Hill. The owners of the B&B were a woman and her elderly mother who had followed my story in the newspapers, felt sorry for me, and miraculously agreed not only to be my employers, but also my surrogate family as I struggled through the first years of my recovery. They were difficult years. I gained 50 pounds. I was often severely depressed. My brain still didn’t function well. The cravings for meth were intense. But at least I had some income, a job with lots of leftovers to eat, and the love and support of those two women who owned the B&B. I knew they genuinely wanted to see me succeed and it made all the difference. If it weren’t for them, I probably wouldn’t have made it.

### **Serving Time**

After successfully completing six months of rehab and staying meth-free for over a year, I knew what had to happen next. In August 2002 I withdrew my case from the Washington State Court of Appeals, and on September 22 I turned myself in to the

Department of Corrections to start serving my sentence.

My situation in prison was precarious. After all, I was an openly gay former prosecutor forced to serve my time in the same jurisdiction where I had spent years putting violent felons behind bars. Most of that time I went unrecognized, and I was fine. But there were times when I was recognized by men I had prosecuted for serious violent offenses, and things got dangerous quickly. As a result, I spent more than two months locked up in solitary confinement for my own protection, in a 9 x 6 foot cell with bright fluorescent lights that could never be turned off. There were many days when I thought I would lose my mind.

Despite that, I will always value the time I spent in prison, the vast majority of which was really helpful. In prison I was safe from temptation during the early fragile years of my recovery. I could never have afforded the two-year inpatient drug rehab I needed. Prison served that role in my life. I met hundreds of men whose lives had been destroyed by drugs, especially meth. For many of them, the drug had taken their teeth, destroyed their skin, and left them with horrible burns from meth lab accidents. Some had lost their minds.

In prison I learned that this was the insanity I had helped foster when I got involved with meth, and this is what I would become if I went back to using it. It was a life-changing lesson and an amazing gift. And although I will always do everything I can to keep my clients out of prison, I genuinely feel I was lucky to go...and even luckier to have lived through it.

It was also from prison that I started writing letters to everyone I knew. That’s how I finally reconnected with family and friends. When their letters came flooding back in, I realized I was no longer alone in my struggle, and I began to believe that if I could stay clean, I just might be able to get my life back.

### **Gaining Hope**

The Washington Supreme Court

doesn't allow disbarred attorneys to work as paralegals in Washington, but other states don't have that rule. So after my release from prison on September 12, 2004, I moved my parole from Seattle to Wilmington, North Carolina, where I reunited with my family and got a job in a civil litigation firm as a paralegal and office manager. I worked there for the next eight years.

During those eight years, I got involved with the North Carolina State Bar's Lawyer Assistance Program (or LAP, as it's called). LAP trained me to be a volunteer and let me serve as a mentor, monitor, and recovery coach for other drug-addicted lawyers. LAP also got me speaking at CLEs, high schools, and community groups about meth addiction and recovery.

It was through LAP that I started going to lunches for lawyers in recovery. The lunches were like 12-step meetings just for attorneys. I went reluctantly at first, but after going for a while I came to understand why 12-steppers are so passionate

about their program. It was in those meetings that I learned just how much shame I was still carrying around with me about the things I had done to other people while using meth—things like worrying my family and friends, embarrassing my co-workers, disappointing my clients, and worst of all, enabling the addictions of other addicts. Those lunch meetings gave me a safe place to talk about my guilt and remorse, and the lawyers there helped me find a way to live with those feelings. I had recovered from meth addiction long before I ever went to my first LAP lawyer lunch, but the things that happened to me at those meetings finally made me feel like I was healed.

It turns out you don't really need "faith" to benefit from a 12-step meeting. All you really need to do is talk and listen. And it was also at those lunches that the other lawyers convinced me to try and get my law license back in Washington. I knew with four felony convictions the chances were slim, but they had faith I could pull it off.

## Reinstatement

It took me almost a year to get ready for my hearing before the WSBA Character and Fitness Board in 2009. I was still a total control freak about all things resembling trials. I represented myself. The hearing lasted over seven hours. After a lot of testimony, a lot of argument, and quite a bit of deliberation, the Board voted to reinstate me.

After retaking the bar exam, I was officially reinstated as a lawyer in Washington in June 2010. Although my original plan was to then get admitted to the bar in North Carolina, part of me never gave up on the idea of moving back to Seattle. As fate would have it, after 12 years of being single, I ended up getting married just a few months before Washington passed marriage equality by popular vote. I took that as a sign. So a year ago in June, my husband and I packed the car and headed west.

I'll always miss North Carolina, but Seattle feels like home. It feels like where I belong. And it feels like the place where my personal history and skill set can do the

## METH BY THE NUMBERS



### Usage Rate

According to a 2012 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, funded by an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and administered by Research Triangle Institute, approximately 1.2 million people in the United States reported using meth.

### Environmental Impact

- Areas where meth-making poisonous by-products are dumped or "dead zones" can contaminate the environment and cost thousands to clean up.
- A small dead zone cleanup can cost \$40,000.
- Much of meth waste is highly flammable and explosive, which

makes it a danger for the summer forest fire season.

- Meth waste leaches moisture from whatever it touches, so it is very harmful to the surrounding environment, whether discarded indoors or outdoors.

### Impact on Economy

- The RAND Corporation released a study stating that meth use costs the United States between \$16.2 and \$48.3 billion per year.
- The annual cost of drug-related crimes in the United States is over \$61 billion, according to the US Department of Justice's National Drug Intelligence Center ([justice.gov/archive/ndic/pubs44/44731/44731p.pdf](http://justice.gov/archive/ndic/pubs44/44731/44731p.pdf)).
- A 2010 National Drug Threat Study found that meth and cocaine cause a majority of drug-related crimes.

### Drug Abuse by Attorneys

- The ABA estimates nearly 20 percent of lawyers suffer from alcohol and substance abuse.
- The national heavy drinkers rate is 26.2 percent of people aged 18 or older, according to the NIH. Attorneys with heavy drinking problems are twice the national rate, according to the ABA's Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs. ([niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/alcohol-facts-and-statistics; americanbar.org/groups/lawyer\\_assistance/resources/alcohol\\_abuse\\_dependence.html](http://niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/alcohol-facts-and-statistics;americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/resources/alcohol_abuse_dependence.html))



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most good for other people struggling with addiction. But I realize I can't be a proper role model for recovery if the people who need me most can't see me. So I make sure I'm visible to them by representing them and telling them my story. Not surprisingly, many of my criminal and family law cases involve issues of addiction.

Recovery from meth is not impossible or uncommon. In my experience, it often takes a lot of external support to get through those

first crucial years of recovery. The reason my addiction blew up in such a spectacular way had a lot to do with how isolated I became from my sober family and friends, and even more to do with my false belief that recovery from meth addiction was not possible. People have recovered from meth addiction, but the stigma makes it very hard to identify themselves publicly. If recovered meth addicts don't start coming out of the shadows and showing their recovery to the world, the

lie that you can't recover from meth addiction will continue and be a huge obstacle for those trying to quit.

### Getting Help

If you have a problem with addiction, the NC Lawyer Assistance Program is ready to provide confidential help. You can meet with a LAP counselor personally, or LAP can set you up with a peer counselor (a fellow attorney) who can speak to you about your options. Best of all, anything you tell your peer counselor is confidential pursuant to Rule 1.6(c). Don't be afraid to ask for help and don't be afraid to accept help when it's offered.

But what if the problem isn't with you? What if someone you care about or work with is struggling with addiction? What can you do to help? Those are really difficult situations, often complicated by a host of other issues. All I can say for certain is that it's important that you don't enable them. Don't give them opportunities, or excuses, or resources that make it easier for them to continue using. But don't give up on them, either. Don't stop caring about them. Tell them their substance abuse is scaring you. Tell them you want them to stop. And remind them that when they're ready to stop, you'll still be there for them, because you care about them.

It can make all the difference. ■

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*The North Carolina Lawyer Assistance Program is a confidential program of assistance for all North Carolina lawyers, judges, and law students, which helps address problems of stress, depression, alcoholism, addiction, or other problems that may lead to impairing a lawyer's ability to practice. If you would like more information, go to nclap.org or call: Cathy Killian (for Charlotte and areas west) at 704-910-2310, Towanda Garner (in the Piedmont area) at 919-719-9290, or Robynn Moraites (for Raleigh and down east) at 704-892-5699.*