

My name is Tylor Sears, and I'm in recovery.

For a long time, I didn't think I would ever say that without it feeling like a lie. Not because I didn't want recovery, but because my body didn't trust peace.

Some of us didn't grow up learning how to feel safe, so peace and calmness always felt untrustworthy.

My mother gave birth to me when she was 13 and just a few years after I was born, I was taken into state custody after showing up to school with a severe wound to my head.

I learned early that things change fast. People disappear. Stability isn't guaranteed. I bounced around in the system like an arcade ball, never quite settling into one place.

Untreated trauma and ADHD mixed together, are known to be a fast track to hurt and addiction. It's a pain that sent me into the streets of Burlington looking for relief.

So my nervous system adapted the only way it knew how, by staying tense, ready, and by never fully resting or trusting anything.

I spent years moving between programs, probation and jail, where I would spend the vast majority of my adult life for a variety of changes stemming from substance abuse.

Not out of weakness, but out of survival.

Substance didn't show up as dangerous, they introduced themselves as relief. I believed it because they slowed my mind down and allowed me to ignore what I had been through and what I was facing. They gave me a feeling I didn't have language for yet, regulation.

And once your brain learns that relief can be instant, it forgets everything that isn't that newfound relief.

It makes its way into every aspect of your life, telling you that nothing can make you happy like the drugs do. It takes over your dopamine production and before you know it, drugs are the only thing that can make you happy enough to even move from your bed. .

Addiction isn't someone wanting to destroy their life. Addiction is not realizing you have a life worth living to begin with.

It's about wanting the pain to stop.

I spent years moving between jails, programs, probation, and the street. Every time I got locked up, people acted like something was being fixed. But nothing was being healed.

Incarceration didn't fix me. It only delayed the fixing longer. Each time I would be released with less skills, more trauma and further behind.

What they don't see about jail is the way it changes your thinking and molds you more like your surroundings. It makes you hardened. Agitated. It reinforced a belief I already carried deep inside:

That I couldn't trust myself with freedom and it made me think there was no hope in a life without substances. It cemented me further in a vicious cycle I was already having the hardest of times breaking free of.

I overdosed more times than I should have survived, a total of 5 times in just this past summer. Once in 2016 in a Phoenix House bathroom, I wasn't found by a peer until 6 hours had gone by. Another time I was outside in a church parking lot this summer.

If not for Jess Kirby at Vermonters for Criminal Justice Reform I wouldn't be here. She stayed giving me Narcan and chest compressions for the 15 minutes it took emergency services to show up. There were many times like this my life should have ended, not dramatically but just gone.

Every time something interrupted the ending.

Not because I deserved it. Not because I figured it out.

I was locked up for a series of drug-related events and that's when something was finally done differently. I wasn't put in jail for months to further the cycle and rot away.

I was sent to Valley Vista.

For the first time in my life, I wasn't treated like a problem to be controlled, I was treated like a human being who needed understanding.

I got around some of the state's best staff and directors, and a few with similar backgrounds to mine.

And immediately something in me changed.

Valley Vista helped me understand why I used. They helped me see a purpose to my life and why I wasn't just discarded in the many times I could have been. Kevin Hamel, Valley Vista's Vice President, pushed me to stay and finish what I started.

He saw something more for me than I had even hoped for myself.

Something that I wasn't going to get by running away from my problems. I took this time to dig deeper into my life and see how I came to be in the position I was. I learned everything I could about my traumas, diagnosis and addiction.

I graduated from Valley Vista's Bradford location a success that didn't come easy and stands as my only successful outcome at rehabilitation. I went from there to their Bradford 3.1 'step-down' program, The Resilience program, where individuals can be housed upwards of 90days,

receiving treatment for substance abuse disorder and co-occurring disorders and while being connected to community resources and being reintegrated back into society.

I utilized this time and my teachings to write a detailed memoir of my life called "But I Stayed"- a memoir on addiction, institutions and God. Not because I wanted to be an author — but because I needed to tell the truth. About addiction. About institutions. About God. About what happens when survival becomes a way of life for too long.

I wanted to bring awareness to the fact that jails, institutions and death ARE NOT the only ways out of addiction. Recovery is the option that gives you back everything that addiction took, and it starts by giving you a chance to reshape your life.

Something I never would have been able to learn without these few very special people in my life, ones that instilled purpose and passion and leaving me no other option but to stay.

For the first time because of these two, I became teachable. Not defensive. Not guarded. Not braced for impact.

I stayed long enough to realize that there truly is so much more to life than what I had been settling for.

And it came the first time I didn't bolt when things felt uncomfortable. The first time I stayed present instead of escaping. The first time I let stability exist without sabotaging it.

Today I'm over 4 months sober.

Not because I was scared straight, but because I was finally shown another way to live. I was finally more than a case file to be managed, a box on a board to be counted.

Recovery didn't take my edge away, It gave me direction.

Healing is possible. Treatment works. Compassion works.

People change. Not just "when they're ready" but when they're given the chance to be understood instead of punished, when they're treated instead of processed.

I didn't stay because it was easy, I stayed because I finally believed my life was worth staying for.

And if you or someone you know is struggling with addiction, I promise you Valley Vista will change your life. It may be one of the hardest choices you'll make but you'll thank yourself for it later.

Thank you.