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Athens man thankful for prosecutor's office's life-changing Vivitrol program

ATHENS, Ohio – Bryan Darst stared at concrete walls while sitting on a cot inside a facility he was all too familiar with. His mind raced, drowning out the noise made from dozens of inmates around him. He knew what he wanted; he'd even had it before, briefly. But he needed a way to keep it. He needed a way to stay sober and an "insurance policy" from [Athens County Prosecutor Keller Blackburn provided that](#) (VIDEO).

Before the age of 30, Darst has been in and out of jail on a variety of charges related to his drug addiction. It had become the norm of a life he no longer wanted to lead. Word spread that a new program hosted by the Athens County Prosecutor's Office included an opiate-blocking treatment called Vivitrol — a program that has since been instrumental in reducing the five-year, age-adjusted rate of overdose deaths in Ohio to one of the lowest in the state.

"I had it in my head that I was done with drugs and I saw that Vivitrol blocked opiates without any kind of mind- or mood-altering chemical with it ... Not like suboxone," Darst said.

Suboxone is another form of medically-assisted treatment that has been criticized because of its tendency to also be misused.

"(Suboxone) is really a loophole and people I knew would just end up using that as their drug of choice. I didn't want that," he added.

Now 33 and living in Athens, Darst wanted something he knew would work. He wanted a real chance at lasting sobriety. He wanted Vivitrol.

Working with Athens County Assistant Prosecutor Meg Saunders, Darst came to an agreement that would see him plead guilty to criminal charges such as forgery, breaking and entering and stealing checks; crimes he committed to fuel his drug habit; charges that had him incarcerated in the Southeastern Ohio Regional Jail and staring at concrete walls.

With seven years in prison hanging over his head, Darst was allowed to enter the Vivitrol program for that chance of sobriety he desperately wanted.

But this isn't a fairy tale and happy endings are not just written. There were obstacles and requirements to Darst's "happily ever after."

On the day that Darst was in court to enter into the plea agreement, he was accused of taking cigarettes from his daughter's diaper bag.

"I was in handcuffs and someone said that when I went to give my daughter a kiss that I snagged a pack of cigarettes. The court officer put me against the wall, searched me and couldn't find them. Then Meg said that for that stupid stunt, I couldn't sign the plea agreement that day and I was sent back to jail," Darst said.

For the record, Darst was asked if he took the cigarettes.

"Yes. Yes, I did."

"It wasn't worth it," he continued. "I couldn't come back for a couple of weeks to sign the agreement but at least I knew they were serious about (the Vivitrol) program."

Vivitrol requires the client to be without drugs in their system for at least 10 days. As it blocks the effects of opiates on the brain, it can also cause illness if drugs are in the body at the time. Those still craving that "fix" for drugs have said Vivitrol removed that feeling immediately. For Darst — already sober while in jail — the shot of Vivitrol had no discernable effect on him when administered. But it was what it represented that mattered most to him.

"Vivitrol was my insurance policy. If going to my recovery meetings wasn't working, talking to my sponsor wasn't working, doing all the things I was supposed to wouldn't work, I'd always have the Vivitrol to fall back on because I knew that even if I did use, I wouldn't feel the effects," he said. "It was my failsafe. If all else fails, that wouldn't."

Darst explained that recovery is difficult for a number of reasons and is different for everyone. He said some have trouble getting through the first day. Some struggle to get to 30 days sober or 60 or 90 days because the process requires the rearranging of habits and comforts. Rather than deal with the feelings that come with withdrawal or that come with the stressors of life, it's sometimes easier for the person to relapse back to coping mechanisms that include the misuse of drugs. Darst did not experience that desire to use again and credits Vivitrol with helping him not think that way.

Darst immersed himself in the cognitive behavior therapy portion of the program and continued to take his monthly shot of Vivitrol. He relied on the prosecutor's office to keep track of his progress while he focused on his recovery day-by-day.

In June 2017, Darst graduated from the Vivitrol program. He completed his sentenced community control in September of 2018 and, as of this writing, Darst has been sober for nearly five years.

"I built such a good relationship with the prosecutor's office. It benefitted me tremendously," he said.

Included in those benefits was a recommendation (and encouragement) from administrators of the program to begin work as peer support with Integrated Services. Darst now works with Mike's Bridge

House where he helps guide others through the recovery process. He's also been featured in TedX talks and spoke at one of Vivitrol's graduation ceremonies.

"The prosecutor's office believed I could do this. I didn't have a lot of hope for myself but they pushed me along and gave me the courage to believe I could do this too," he said.

Instead of concrete walls surrounding him, Darst uses his experience to help others avoid that environment.

"It has its good days and its bad days. It's awesome to see guys grow in recovery and achieve their goals. I get a lot more reward out of seeing others progress in their recovery than I do myself," Darst said.

Addiction, however, is still very real in Darst's life. At the time of this interview, Darst had recently experienced the death of a former client. His voice shook slightly and his breath quivered when he recounted the story.

"He'd just left last week ... and he died on Saturday. It sucks. I tell the guys we're lucky to have made it out alive," he said.

Darst tries to keep an eye on the light rather than the dark.

"It's nice to see people get their families back and get to see their kids again, become fathers, become everything they want to be," he said.

He keeps that same attitude towards himself.

"I use that saying that my worst day in recovery is still better than my best day getting high," he said. "I went fishing all day and didn't catch a fish but I was still happy. We recently lost someone and it's a hard thing to deal with but we have to share the message that it doesn't have to end like that."

"Bryan Darst is an example that anyone at any point can be saved. He has been to prison. He has fallen on tough times. He was down and out and he took an opportunity to participate in our Vivitrol program and turned his life around," said Athens County Prosecutor Keller Blackburn.

Vivitrol program administrators Reuben Kittle and Becky Filar make it a point to keep an open-door policy for anyone that needs to speak or just wants to vent about their frustrations in recovery or otherwise. Darst said he often takes advantage of the opportunity.

"I've said it a million times, I couldn't be more grateful, thankful, appreciative of everything the prosecutor's office has done for me and the opportunities they gave me to change my life. I hope I can continue to give back to the community and help any way that I can."

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To schedule an interview with Prosecutor Keller Blackburn, please contact 740-592-3208.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gfwoDzChbSs> (Edited)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4PgtDEFvuA> (Full)



