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Prosecutor's office opens recovery path for Athens County man

ATHENS, Ohio – A.J. Smith, a graduate of Federal Hocking High School in Athens County, Ohio, played sports in school, served in the United States Marine Corp, traveled the world, climbed Mt. Fuji (twice) and he destroyed relationships, stole from the elderly, passed out on a client while cutting hair and overdosed on drugs at least a handful of times.

After several stints in and out of hospitals, rehabilitation centers and halfway houses, Smith crossed paths with Athens County Prosecutor Keller Blackburn and his office's Community Justice programs. Four years later (as of April 2), Smith is a new person in sobriety.

"It's beautiful how much life has changed in just four years," Smith said. "I have to keep that humility though and that mindset because that's the only reason this new life is possible is because I'm continuing to do things that got me sober. It's awesome and way more than I deserve."

The Athens County Prosecutor's Office's Community Justice programs are designed to address the underlying issues of crime (including substance misuse) and to better the community. Smith took advantage of the program to enroll in Any Length Recovery in South Carolina for a fresh start and a chance at a new life.

"From not only me but from every addict and alcoholic in our area, thank you. I don't know if enough people tell Keller and the rest of that office 'thank you' enough because I'm sure there are a lot of people who they try to help aren't always accepting of it right then but they're planting the seed that you can get out of that lifestyle," Smith said. "I think (the prosecutor's office) is doing a lot of amazing things for our area and I personally appreciated it and I'm sure others do too."

Smith, 33, can remember his first high. In eighth grade, he had his wisdom teeth removed and was given a prescription for the pain.

"I knew I loved opiates as soon as I took the first one," Smith said.

On almost a dozen occasions, Smith was prescribed pain medications for various sports-related injuries from middle school and high school. Each time, it was almost like a reward for having suffered the injury.

“You just take a deep breath, and I felt this sense of calm. It’s hard to explain. I just know I really liked it,” Smith said. “But it became worse and worse a need and it became more and more a problem.”

Smith’s grades suffered and his game suffered. Weekend drug use turned to everyday use. During a big game, Smith’s performance lacked because he’d decided to use drugs prior. He made a fool of himself with the opposite sex and he would often drink until he blacked out. For Smith, “recreational” drug use wasn’t an option; he favored the extreme.

“I knew I shouldn’t be doing this, but I think the selfish pros outweighed the cons,” he said.

After high school, Smith had plans to enter military service. While employed with an area gas station, Smith was caught stealing to fund his pill buys and it forced his hand. His employer agreed not to press charges if he’d enlist as planned, believing Smith would benefit from military service.

“I was lucky to get that chance and five days after I was caught, I joined and headed to Parris Island,” said Smith.

Still addicted and using opiates, Smith faked his urinalysis during the screening for the Marine Corp. In boot camp, he’d convince others who had pills for various reasons to sell or give him the drugs. He managed to hide his addiction for four years until he tested positive and was discharged.

“I was an ammunition technician and dealing with blasting caps while high and drunk. I’m lucky I didn’t die or kill someone else to be honest,” Smith said.

Back home, Smith continued his drug misuse and networked with others with addiction issues. A few years after leaving the military, Smith had switched from pills to heroin and experienced the high it brought and the sickness it left.

“I stole an old woman’s purse trying to find money. She was just a sweet old woman and I did that,” he said. “I lost all morals and ethics. Nothing matters besides getting what you need to feel better. It’s disgusting the person you turn into. You end up hanging around people who would just as soon cut your throat to get their next fix. Or, you become one of those people.”

Smith tried barber school and after passing out while giving a client a haircut, he entered his first rehabilitation facility. The day after he left, he went home and overdosed on drugs. It was the first of several times he’d wake in a hospital having done so.

Smith tried suboxone. And he tried methadone. He still couldn’t hold a job and felt that he was just trading one addiction for another. At one point, he considered ending his own life.

“Every dollar you get goes to drugs. I remember my grandma crying while giving me money,” he said. “I was a taker. Addicts are master manipulators. Those skills are out of this world. If I could tell you a story to get some more money, I could tell it about anything.”

Next up, Smith tried vivitrol — an opiate blocking medication — through Health Recovery Services. While it did its job to remove the pull of opiates, vivitrol couldn’t stop Smith from trying a different drug

in cocaine. Feelings of guilt and shame overwhelmed him and it would only get worse as he missed a vivitrol treatment and turned back to heroin, leading to another overdose.

He survived but everything in his life had been destroyed. His parents finally changed the locks. He had no employment prospects. He'd already failed in halfway houses and had nowhere else to go.

"I wanted to stop doing drugs. I just couldn't. I didn't know how," Smith said. "I didn't want to die but I couldn't stop using. I couldn't help myself."

Smith was directed to speak with the prosecutor's office and Reuben Kittle, director of the diversion program and a key member of the Community Justice program. After first considering a short-term rehabilitative program, Kittle instead offered an opportunity at Any Length Recovery in South Carolina.

"A.J. called me one day and said, 'My parents told me I better call you. Can you help me?' He came to the office that day. We assessed him and found a program for him. His road to recovery was paved and he took the path," said Athens County Prosecutor Keller Blackburn. "A.J. wasn't charged with a felony in Athens County, but our program is available to anyone who wants to begin to recover. Making our community better starts with having a healthy public. Reducing active drug users is the single most important thing we can do to reduce crime."

"It was exactly what I needed," Smith said. "It was a long way from home and I had no choice but to stay there and follow the rules or leave there and go be homeless in South Carolina and probably die on the streets. I decided to sit down, shut up and listen to what they had to say."

Smith completed 14 months of the program and started to feel as though he may have a chance at a normal life. He found hope.

"I had brothers in recovery. I got a phone, a car and an apartment," he said. "I started to be content."

Smith continues to practice his recovery and is holding down a full-time job. Recently, he purchased his first home.

"Life's not easy by any means. I was selfish, very selfish," he said. "I was a scared kid who said he loved a lot of people but really didn't. I took care of myself and that was it. Drugs turned me into a person I didn't want to be."

By accepting the lessons in recovery, Smith has been able to create a new life for himself and become a person he, his parents and others can be proud of.

"I try to be honest about everything now and do the right thing. I want my word to mean something and I like to give back when I can," he said. "I like to think that I'm there for family and friends in ways I haven't been in the past."

