

# How A Self-Destructive Past Led To The Bet Of A Lifetime

**By Sean Chase**

**B**efore I had a concept of the subconscious mind, the world's unfair nature was ingrained in me as early as I can recall. My first experience with this undeniable truth started with a fire in our apartment complex. My younger brother and I had already moved from Michigan to Ohio and back again with our mother. We were constantly on the move, and this was the first moment that things had felt like they were slowing down. Then, one night, our mother woke us up and rushed us down the steps of our apartment.

I was very young at the time, but I still remember that my favorite toy was a Stretch Armstrong doll that I carried everywhere with me. However, after the rush to survive, amidst the sirens and flashing lights of the firetruck, I realized I didn't have the doll. Once the commotion had subsided, we were allowed to return to our apartment where I found Stretch - covered in fire extinguisher residue - had melted. We later learned that an electrical fire had started in an adjacent apartment. While we didn't lose everything, we could no longer stay there. I was devastated.

From time to time I find myself looking back on this era of my life, and while many parts were chaotic and money wasn't abundant, our house was full of one thing, and that was love.

Until I was 5, the fire had been the most tragic thing I had experienced until one day at recess. On

a normal day, I would run to the gigantic wooden castle, where my cousin Katie was always waiting for me. She was two years older than me, but I followed her around everywhere she went. When I reached the castle on this particular day my cousin wasn't there.

Within hours I was pulled from class and sitting with my mom and a counselor. Tears flowed down my mom's face as they told me that my cousin had passed away. The cause was complications of meningitis, but at the time I was confused and overwhelmed. I broke down. How could my best friend just disappear? This was a question I would ask myself again later in life.

Soon after my cousin died, my sister was born, shining a light into the darkness that had enveloped my mind. While my mother was pregnant, she began the process of having her new husband adopt my brother and me. This was after our biological father signed away his rights to avoid paying past-due child support. On Oct. 1, 1996, the process was finalized and I had to learn how to write my new last name.

I assume that I was greatly affected by this drastic change in my identity, but in all honesty, it wasn't much of a departure from the life that I had been accustomed to. From the time I was a year old, my adopted father was in my life for everything, good and bad. Instead of being humbled by the love this man had for the people I care about, I became angry. I was hiding the fact that I was in pain dealing with an invisible demon, abandonment.

At the time I hid my emotions extremely well, largely because I didn't understand the emotions I was experiencing. Just as I was finding my footing in the first grade, my world was shattered.

My brother, sister, and I had just spent the entire weekend in Grand Rapids with our mom's mom. Opening presents and baking walnut chocolate chip cookies with grandma had become a yearly tradition to cele-

brate Christmas. In 1996, things were different and we were unwrapping gifts at the end of November.

On Dec. 1, after working her shift at McDonald's, my mom arrived to pick us up from my Grandma Sandy's house. As we piled into my mom's 1985 Plymouth Voyager, for the 45-minute trip back to our home in Grant, I recall my grandma wanting to clean off the vehicle's windows, especially because the weather had taken a turn for the worst overnight.

After cleaning the windows, we said our goodbyes to grandma, through the cracked driver's side window and set off. Within a few minutes of the drive, I fell asleep, assuming I would wake up as we pulled into the driveway of the two-story, faded white house, where my parents were renting the bottom floor.

I was still asleep when my mom lost control of the van and slid into oncoming traffic. We collided with a Dodge Ram pickup towing a camper.

All of the sudden, I remember floating into the air. However, I wasn't afraid, which was odd given my insane fear of heights. Instead, I was filled with a feeling of inner peace and blanketed by a calmness I had never experienced. And I wasn't alone.

What happened next can be dismissed as a dream, especially because I was only 6. For me though, it was the most real thing I have ever experienced.

I was holding onto my mother's ankle. I remember

her shaking as if she was trying to break free of me. I lost my grip. Just as I began falling, I remember my mom saying, "It isn't your time. Go and take care of the family." And I began to plummet toward the ground. Before impact, I snapped awake in a hospital bed.

Turns out I had been in a coma and had coded twice on the way to the hospital. Once I was aware of my surroundings, my Grandma Ruth told me that my mother was hurt in a car accident, and had gone to heaven. Through the window of my intensive care unit room, I could see doctors working on my infant sister who was seriously injured. The newest "Jurassic Park" was on the TV in my room, but I don't remember any scenes from the movie.

I buried most of the memories from that time, but there is one that I can't seem to get rid of. After being released from the hospital, my father moved us into his mom's house to help with the pressure of raising three kids, including my sister, who was paralyzed on the left side of her body and required constant care due to injuries she sustained in the accident.

One night, I was visited by my mom in a dream. However, we were in the mirror room of a funhouse and there were hundreds of people who looked extremely similar to my mom. I searched and searched, but I couldn't find my mom. I was overcome with fear that I may forget her. I held myself responsible for my mom's passing.



In an attempt to clutch onto any memory of her we had, my brother and I transferred to Newaygo Elementary school, where she had gone to school as a child. On my first day at the school, at recess, a counselor accompanied me on my journey to make friends. In front of a set of double doors that were recently demolished, I was introduced to two boys including Danny Staten, who would go on to help me become the man I am today.

Time continued on, and eventually, the feeling of missing my mom became normal. For a while, I was lost in a haze, trying to understand the pain that had overtaken me. To avoid dealing with the emotional overload, I chose to bury the feelings, and instead of tears, they turned into vicious anger that could bubble over at a moment's notice. Through all of it, Danny stayed by my side to ensure I made something of myself.

For much of my teenage years, I had forgotten the words of my mother and subsequently, I was out of control. I would beat on my brother without regard for the physical and emotional harm I was causing him. One day, when I was 15 while sitting on the front steps of our house, my brother had pissed me off and instead of acting rational, I blamed him for the death of our mother. This is something that still haunts me today, especially because I was seemingly spitting in the face of our mother, disregarding her final words to me.

Instead of trying to atone for my mistakes, I dove further into my maniacal mindset when I graduated high school in 2008. I tried college a few times, but I was in a mental space where I thought the only reasonable solution to my problems was death. So in February of 2009, I set out to join the United States Army. After speaking with a recruiter, I signed up and was given a date to fly out to Fort Knox, Kentucky.

After graduating from U.S. Army Armor School, in September of 2009, I was informed that I would be stationed in Germany, which was extremely exciting since

I had never traveled further than Ohio at that point in my life. My time in Germany was filled with alcohol-fueled tirades involving my battle buddies and preparation for my upcoming trip to Afghanistan. It seemed that I was finally going to find my exit from this life, as I boarded the C-17 jet and clicked in the buckles of the four-point harness that held me in my seat.

One year later, after a hellacious ride in a Chinook helicopter, I found myself boarding a similar plane at an airfield in Manas, Kyrgyzstan headed back to my barracks room in Germany, something I never expected. Instead of finding the joy in returning home from war, I tried to drown myself in Bacardi 151 rum. Turning into a raging alcoholic, oftentimes falling asleep on a picnic table outside of the barracks. At the height of my insanity, I began out-processing from my unit in Germany, leaving behind my battle buddies and was stationed at Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas.

As my location changed, my drinking only intensified as I was experiencing issues with my fiancé at the time. My infidelity and inability to commit created the perfect storm in our relationship, which ended in a brutal breakup. Instead of waking up from my stupor, I continued to circle the drain until July 8, 2012, the day my niece, Aliyah, was born. Within a month, I had enrolled in a substance abuse program through the Army and sought out counseling as a way to battle my demons. While there were occasional relapses, things were finally headed in a positive direction.

Then one day, as we were unpacking my concussion history, the counselor that I had been assigned asked me if I had ever thought about seeking a medical retirement from the Army. Until the words came out of her mouth, I didn't even know that was an option. But, because I had experienced a concussion during my time in Afghanistan, I was considered to have a service-connected disability. After filling out the paperwork for retirement, and waiting almost a year, my medical retirement was approved.

Every day during the year I waited to get out of the Army, I thought about what my future would hold. Where would I live? How would I survive without the Army's rigid structure?

Once I touched down in Michigan, I moved into an apartment with my brother and his daughter. After a few short months, we moved into a more suitable house, with Danny, who had recently graduated from Central Michigan University.

For a while things were picturesque. My brother and I were getting along. Then my anger resurfaced. Danny and I had gone for a ride when my car ran out of gas in the middle of nowhere. I dialed my brother's number, to see if he would bring us some gas, but he was preoccupied with something else. Once someone else delivered us gas, instead of thinking rationally and taking time to calm down, I drove home and exploded on my brother.

In what was one of our worst fights, we decided that it was best for us to go our separate directions and he moved out with his daughter, into his girlfriend's mom's house, leaving Danny and I to uphold the lease agreement on our current place. Things settled down between my brother and I, as I went about my daily life working at a local restaurant. Then after visiting family members, and making plans for Thanksgiving, my world was rocked again.

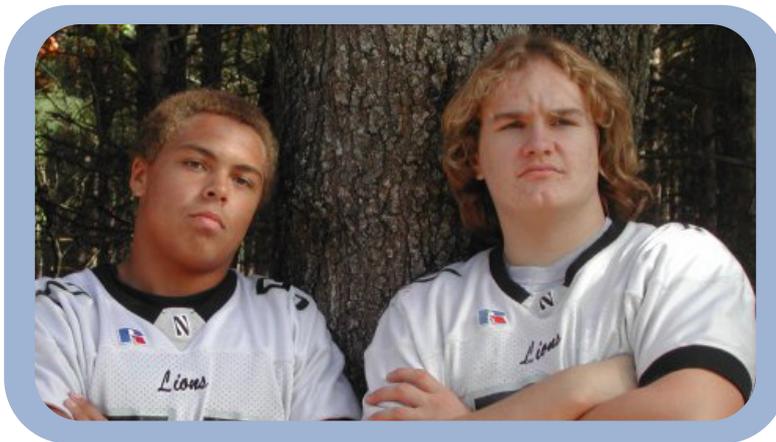
You see, nowadays I spend every moment I can

with my niece and nephew, but that wasn't always the case. When I left the Army, I was more focused on smoking weed and catching up on everything I had missed while I was gone, over spending time with my niece. While she was awake, I would sleep on the couch, as Danny and her watched "Barney" and sang songs. He, once again, had picked up my slack.

At this point in life, I was 23 and nearing the same age my mother was when she passed away. Since her death, I had been constantly nagged by the idea that I wouldn't live past 24, as well. On April 14, 2014, my 24th birthday, I was overcome by the fear I had been avoiding, breaking down in tears in my grandma's kitchen.

After waking up on the 15th, these fears began to fade and I went on with my life. However, that fear turned into self-hatred. I felt I had squandered opportunities I would never get again, and my mind became enveloped in suicidal thoughts. Once I expressed what I was going through to Danny, he sat with me and talked about why I was thinking this way. He told me that I needed to find a reason to keep going, and he ultimately saved my life that day.

In an effort to repay my friend for extending his hand to me in my darkest time, I decided to cook him one of my favorite meals, shrimp po boys. Before we headed to the grocery store to pick up supplies, we stopped to pick up another buddy of ours, Max Benton. The three of us mobbed through the local Plumbs, without a care in the world, like we owned the town. Danny picked out every aspect of the meal, from the



*Danny (Left), Sean (Right)*

type of bread to the sides. Once we got back to the house I began preparing food, as we fired jokes back and forth from the kitchen to the living room.

On Nov. 26, 2014, a day which my niece was supposed to be at our house. I woke up to an eerie quietness I hadn't expected. It felt like no one else was in the house. Instead of investigating the situation, I decided that I would let Danny sleep.

In college, Danny had started experiencing seizures, but with the help of medication, things seemed to be under control. The night before my niece was set to arrive, after we devoured the shrimp po boys, he had informed me that he was afraid if he didn't stay up past 4 a.m. that he was going to have a seizure again. So, we stayed up and I tried to calm his worries. But when he headed off to sleep, sometime around 3:30 a.m., I saw something in his eyes I had never seen before. He looked to be lost in thought, as we said goodnight.

Unable to sleep, and with Danny tossing and turning in his bed, in the room directly next to mine. I got up and made my best interpretation of a tuna melt, hoping that a full stomach would put me to sleep. My trick worked, and I stumbled to my bed and straight to sleep.

After taking a shower and getting dressed in my white button-up shirt and black slacks, which was the required uniform for cooks at the Grant Depot, I decided to go into Danny's room to check on him and tell him I'd see him after work.

As I opened the door, it stopped unexpectedly, with a thud, against something I was unable to see. The gap between the door and frame was large enough so that I could poke my head in to figure out what was in the way. In front of the door, laying face down was Danny. After screaming his name multiple times, and trying to wake him up. I quickly grabbed my

phone and dialed my brother. I explained the situation, and he told me to call 911, as he called Danny's mom and headed to my house.

I dialed 911. As I talked to the operator, who sent an ambulance, and contacted my dad for me, I walked out of my house. Unable to go back to the room where my best friend lay dead, I collapsed in a pile of snow, turning into a heap of tears and anger. My brother arrived before the ambulance, and we hugged. We both had lost our best friend that day.

Once the ambulance arrived and transported Danny's body from our home, I sat in the house with my father and Danny's brother reminiscing about the

good times. After everyone had left, I sat in the house alone, consuming extreme amounts of marijuana, trying to combat the insomnia that overwhelmed me for four days. At some point, I made the decision that I would speak at Danny's funeral, in the hopes of expressing how much he meant to me.

On Dec. 1, 2014, the day of Danny's funeral had arrived and I was back at the same funeral home where my mother's funeral was held.

Growing up in Newaygo, Danny endured unfair treatment and racism at every turn throughout his life, because of the color of his skin. Being the only African American on any of our sports teams, he experienced hatred from the stands designated for our supporters. No matter how he was treated, he never turned to violence, always choosing to kill his enemies with kindness. Everywhere he went he extended his hand, and helped those who were struggling on their journey.

Although, when he was pulled from a car full of people and searched, solely because he was the only Black person in the vehicle, it seemed Newaygo would never look past his ethnicity, and give him a fair shake. On the day of the funeral, the parking lot and funeral home was jam-packed with cars and people, spilling into the lanes of M-37. Familiar or not, everyone had

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gathered to pay their respects to an incredibly caring human. After the pastor spoke, it was time for speeches to happen.

I've always considered myself a writer, and when I thought about Danny's effect on my life, the words flowed out of me. However, I underestimated the pain I was experiencing, and when I got up to speak I could feel my emotions bubbling up. After fist-bumping the casket, and saying my final words to my friend, I stepped up to the podium and opened my notebook. Through a stream of tears, I was able to deliver my speech with his mother standing by my side, although I felt as if I had stepped out of my body.

For a few years following the funeral, I was stuck in a cycle of drug abuse and self-pity. Bouncing from job to job, I found myself more lost than I had ever been in my life. Then one day, I snapped out of my self-destructive mindset and started to focus on becoming a better man. Throughout my life, I had been presented with examples of people who preserved through their struggles and found peace in their life. Even through their hardships, they greeted everyone they encountered with warmth and a smile, and I envied them for this.

Hungry to shift how the world viewed me, I spent time analyzing the similarities between the people who affected my life the most. I began trying to identify and work through my trauma, bit by bit, in an attempt to release the hurt that I had bottled up deep within my soul. After coming to the realization that many of my issues were brought on by myself. I decided the best way to stop my self-destructive ways was to bet on myself. Seemingly out of nowhere, I quit a job as a CNC machinist and enrolled in college at 29 years old.

Since I was familiar with the campus, having attended Grand Rapids Community College briefly after high school, I only wanted to go to one school. When I got to GRCC, I had no clue what to expect, but I had a goal in mind. I wanted to get a degree and work my way into the sports radio business, hoping to calm the storm inside of me and make my mom and Danny

proud. After the first semester, I knew that I made the right decision. It wasn't until my third semester at the school, that I made a realization that changed my life.

The 2020 winter semester was one unlike any other, as schools shut down and we were forced to learn from home. This style of learning requires an immense amount of dedication. As the semester wore on, my grades began to fall. I was in danger of failing my entire semester, in three weeks I had let everything fall apart.

As I was scrambling to salvage the semester and get out of GRCC as fast as possible. It struck me, I had to want the degree for myself otherwise no matter how hard I worked, I would fail in the end. I realized the best way to honor the memory of those I lost was to concentrate my efforts on my education and improving my life.

I had to find whatever remnants remained of the self-discipline instilled in me while I was in the Army, and continue to move forward. It wasn't easy to climb out of the hole that I had dug, but the other option was failing myself and the people I loved. That was something I wasn't willing to do, and after escaping the semester with straight C's, I was still on track to graduate.

Once the summer semester began, I started to babysit my niece. With the lighter schedule, I was able to spend time with her and things slowed down. My grades picked up, and my bond with my niece grew stronger than ever. This experience showed me that anyone can recover from a bad past as long as you're willing to put in the work required.

There were multiple times that I wanted to quit, and revert back to my self-destructive ways. For some reason, this time around I didn't spiral out of control, and that was a small positive that built into better mental habits. Through that success, I was able to tackle the problem that had plagued me my whole life. I found a love for myself that had never existed.