

Pastors' Kids Can Make Poor Decisions, Too

by Stephanie Vawter

Norma: Stephanie, how long have you been in recovery for and what kind of journey has recovery been for you?

Stephanie: I went to Phoenix to get sober. My mom and dad came in the middle of the night and got me from Denver where I was living at the time. They asked me if I wanted help. At that time I was ready for Help. I do truly think that was a moment of clarity from God and that moment was right. If they had come day before it might not have been right. If they had come the day after it might not have been right. That is just what I believe. They came and I went to detox in Denver for three days. They ask me if I wanted to come to Arizona for treatment. I did. I went to a three-week inpatient treatment. Afterward I kept staying in Arizona even though I didn't like it. The reason I kept staying is that while I was in treatment I was introduced to Alcoholics Anonymous. I found an AA group that was close to their house where I was living. I met people there in recovery that were doing things that I hoped to accomplish. They were moving on with their life. They were no longer victims. They were using the 12 steps of AA. They were getting healthy. For me that is what the last four years have been. Going to AA and really trying to live my life by the principles of AA. The 12 steps... could be AA; it could be narcotics anon; it could be any group. I just go to AA because it has been the main point of my recovery.

Norma: Has the recovery process gotten easier each year? And has it felt like it has been an easy thing to do or has it been hard work? How would you characterize your recovery the last four years?

Stephanie: I think it is easier in the beginning because you don't know what you are doing. They have a saying in AA that you are on the "pink cloud" and that lasts anywhere from a couple of months to maybe the first year. You are on this pink cloud because everything is good. You are clean and off drugs. You are getting your life back together. For me it was that I was so happy to be out of the situation I had been in. I felt safe. I was living at my mom and dad's house. For me I needed to be in a half-way house or their house, which turned out to be, like a half-way house. It was good because I needed the responsibility. In the beginning you don't know anything and you are learning. It is almost like being in the first grade learning to read and you are so excited. It is not a struggle at first because you aren't learning all of the hard words. It is almost like those early days of reading because I had to learn how to be an adult, sober human being in the world.

I did not have problems with physical grievances. Some people I know have years of years of sobriety and still have desire to drink or use drugs everyday. I don't. I again think that was a miracle that God gave me. That is just my experience. It is not everyone's experience. I don't know that I know anymore today than I did in the beginning. I don't know that it is any easier today than it is in the beginning. I just have to start every day like it is the first day. There is a crotchety old guy in our AA group called, "Needle point Jim." He has about 40 years of sobriety. He actually needle points in the meetings. He says that who ever got up earliest today has the most time sober today. That is really true because some days even though I have four years sober someone who came in and has two days sober might say something that I need to hear that day. So sobriety is really not about how much time you have but just about that day.

Norma: Four years ago was that the first treatment that you had received?

Stephanie: I had not been in treatment before. In high school I had been to couple of different counselors for depression. One time I got caught with marijuana and we went to a weird treatment place for an outpatient sort evaluation. No continued treatment.

Norma: We'll talk some more about your recovery later on. But being a parent of drug abuser and an alcoholic I identify with the parent here today myself. I am sure they are wondering like I am how you look back over your growing up years. How would describe your home life? What was it like being the daughter of a pastor?

Stephanie: Our home life was great. My mom was home. I had a younger brother. We had a dog. We had a tree house and all that kind of stuff. I think in some ways that when you are a child of a pastor you are in the public eye. Whether you the parent think your kid is or not they are. Some ways I didn't like that but in some ways I kind of liked it because you are this little celebrity in your own little weird place. There is also pressure because people in the church want you to be perfect so they can say, 'look at the pastor's kids; look at what they are doing.' I think I put a lot the pressure on myself rather than other people. I think that is my personality. My brother for example. Sundays we would go to church. I felt as I walked through the foyer and seeing people I had to say hi to all those people that I knew. My brother on the other hand could just walk through and ignore everybody in the world. He didn't feel guilty or that he was doing anything wrong. So I think it depends on the personality as well. Being a pastor's kid is not why I chose drugs. Your kid is in a position of being looked at and people want them to be accountable. So that is something for the parent who is in the ministry to be aware of.

Norma: When did you start using drugs, Stephanie? Can you recall what was going through your mind or reasoning when you first tried drugs?

Stephanie: I did some experimenting in high school. The thing that went through my mind the first time that I got high was that "this is great" because I didn't feel bad anymore. I didn't feel any pain. I didn't feel any pressure from anyone. I didn't feel any pressure from myself. I felt good. People don't do drugs because it makes them feel bad. I did them because they made me feel good. They took away the pain, frustration, guilt or whatever it was that I was feeling at the time.

Norma: With the pain you were feeling when you were a teenager and first started experimenting with drugs was that pain specific? Was it something you were specifically going through or was it just adolescent pain? What was it that drew you to think, "I might try this?" Was it the pain pushing you to feel better or was it something else? Do you remember?

Stephanie: I think it was a combination of a number of different things. I was not happy in school. I was over weight as a kid. I've been as tall as I am today since I was about 11. I never really felt anonymous at school. I just wanted to blend in and not have anybody notice me. I wasn't able to do that. So part of that was the pain, I think. Looking back I recognize now that I was probably depressed for a long time in school. However, I think part of it was just adolescence that as a kid that you don't know what is going on with you.

Norma: Where did you find the drugs then? How did you get them initially as a teenager? Did a friend of yours just come up and say, "Here, Stephanie, try this, it is great. Or, did you go looking for them? How did that happen?

Stephanie: Contrary to what people say nobody came up to me and offered me drugs. Maybe that is because the few friends I had were not around that. The first time I ever tried marijuana I actually got it from a boy who went to my father's church. That is whom I got it from.

Norma: I am asking you this because as a parent and a parent whose life revolved around the church I always wonder about this. Do you just know who has it and then you go up and say, "May I have some?" Or, how does that first time happen when you know drugs aren't good and maybe your parents taught you they weren't? How did that happen?

Stephanie: Well, I think I knew who to ask at school had I been looking for drugs. I would have known what kid to ask, not that they would have sold them to me. Maybe they would not have

trusted me. Kids know. You can't cloister your kid away because if kids want to find the drugs they will find. It is very easy to find them.

Norma: Was it a big step for you to go and ask a guy for them or did it just come up naturally? Was it something you thought about the night before and thought tomorrow I am going to try marijuana?

Stephanie: No, it was not a conscious decision that, "tomorrow I am going to do this." This was just friend's brother and I just asked.

Norma: When you first started with marijuana and you experimented you obviously enjoyed it the first time and wanted to do it again. Did you think your parents might be really upset if they found out or did their response even cross your mind when you first started using? How did that precede your relationship with your parents? Did you go and tell them, "I am using marijuana and hope it is okay with you."

Stephanie: What they were thinking and how they might respond did not cross my mind. During high school I only experimented a few times. When they did catch me that first time I was mad--probably more defensive as I reflect on it. My dad and I are very similar in personalities so it was sort of a battle of the wills. I had found something that made me feel better and I had probably only used marijuana once. They intervened and we went to this drug evaluation. I wasn't thinking of anyone else. I was thinking that I felt better when I tried the drugs. That is what mattered to me at that point because I did feel so badly.

Norma: So you went through the evaluation and your parents knew and then you let it go for a while as a teenager and then came back to it later remembering that it felt good to you? How was the relationship with your parents after they found out about marijuana? How did you feel toward them? How did they feel toward you? Were you able to talk about drug use? What was the relationship like during those years once they knew you had used marijuana?

Stephanie: I don't think we talked about it anymore, but I think at that point our relationship got better. I went away to a boarding school for a year. The year I was gone I think we all grew up a little. Then I came home and decided that I wanted to get the heck out of our town so I started working a lot to save money. I think that we kind of all matured and we didn't talk about drugs because it wasn't an issue at that point. I had a goal to get out of here and I went to school. I didn't want to get in trouble because I didn't want anything to jeopardize my moving to another city with a girl friend. I was just working my buns off to get out of there.

Norma: When did drugs become an issue again?

Stephanie: When I moved to Denver I was 18 and I had some friends who lived there. For the first time I found a whole circle of friends who seemed like me, acted like me, who I related to. They were different like me, outcasts. So it was great to have this huge circle of friends, which I never had before. Some of these people did use drugs. This is when drugs were reintroduced sort of just as a common thing.

Norma: Can you trace your drug use for us so we understand how you got to the point where you mom and dad had to come and found you on that morning when they intervened and realized you were using heroin and took you back down to Phoenix. Can you tell us how this happened? Just how ever you want to from the time you were in Colorado on your own making your new friends, found there was drugs among your friends and then what steps took you to that point.

Stephanie: Well, it began just by smoking marijuana. At that point with these friends we would go out sometimes and drink. I was never a good drinker. I always tried to be. I tried to teach myself how to drink like all my friends, because I was never a very good drinker. But then people

had marijuana and so I experimented with it. That went on for several years off and on. Then that escalated. During this time I was going to school and working. Then the marijuana use escalated to where I was smoking marijuana every day. But it wasn't making me feel good; it wasn't erasing the pain. Then my very best friend, whose brother had used heroin and then got clean, was a nurse and stole some morphine from the hospital and we took those. This would have been about 1995.

The first time I took morphine I thought, "This is how I want to feel for the rest of my life." I didn't feel anything; no pain; I didn't worry about anything. That was the feeling I had been looking for forever. And at that point in my drug addict rationale, my friend had begun to use a lot. I was worried about her. I told her I couldn't hang around with her anymore if she was still using drugs. But then I started using heroin. I met someone who was selling heroin and started hanging around this person. At first it was just on the weekend. Then it was on a Thursday. Then it was on Friday. Pretty soon it was every day. For the first six months I told myself I could stop anytime that I wanted because I wasn't addicted. But the feeling was so good that I didn't want to stop. And that continued for almost a year and half until my mom and dad came and got me.

What had happened was that I tried to quit several times myself. I couldn't do it because physically it is not very pleasant to get off heroin. So I had tried a couple times on my own. It didn't work. I had gone down to Mexico with this person I was hanging out with who had this brilliant idea that could go to Mexico and wean ourselves off heroin using pharmaceuticals we could buy there. But it didn't work. I was in Mexico and ran out of money. I called my brother and he wired me some money. Then I called my mom and she wired me some money. In both cases I made up some grandioso story. Then I was still there and ran out of money again. I called my aunt—my father's sister—who was smart enough to know that something wasn't right. She called my mom and dad. They called my brother and said they suspected something was wrong. They said, "You have to tell us." He said, "Yeah." I had told my brother that I was using heroin but had sworn him to secrecy. That's another thing about pastors' kids as siblings. He thought that I would never talk to him again. Pastor's kids stick together. It's kind of like you're on the same team.

So that's how it happened. They called my brother, he said yes. They were actually on their anniversary in California. They flew to Denver. I was not home yet because I was still in Mexico. I got into an argument with my friend and left. I was driving home from Juarez, Mexico. I was all by myself with no stereo because I sold it. I didn't have enough gas money to get home. I stopped in Santa Fe, New Mexico I knew someone there. I told him some crazy story and wrote him a bad check for \$40.00. I got home to Denver. I had been home about an hour. The whole way home I kept thinking, "I have to do something. What am I going to do? How am I going to stop?" I did have health insurance at that time. I thought I could maybe just check myself in to treatment and nobody would have to know. I thought I could just clean myself up in a week. It didn't dawn on me to ask Mom and Dad for help. I don't know if it's because I didn't want to hurt them or that I was ashamed. It just never dawned on me to pick up the phone and say, "Hey, I'm hooked on heroin. Can you come up here and help me out." So, I had been home about an hour, was laying down in my room and the front door opened. I thought it was my roommate. My mom and dad walked in and said, "We know and we want you to come get help." I said, "okay." My bag was still packed. I'd just home from Mexico, and off we went.

Norma: Stephanie, looking back on it can you see impact that the drug use made on your daily life? It doesn't seem like you were able to see it while you were living it? How were you able to keep a job and go to school at different times? What impact did drug usage have on your daily life?

Stephanie: Well, I wasn't going to school or working while I was using heroin. When I was using marijuana I did go to school but not continuously. I'd go to school for a while and stop. And I was

working. But when I was using Heroin I didn't do anything. I had some money saved up so that's what I was living off of but I didn't do anything. I stayed in the house all day long.

Norma: Isn't heroin expensive? How did you buy it?

Stephanie: This friend that I was hanging around with and got the heroin from sold heroin. I let him live in a basement apartment and he gave me the drugs.

Norma: One time I heard you say that addicts are good liars. Can you elaborate on that? What is the significance between lying and addiction?

Stephanie: Well, when you're an addict you'll lie about anything and anyone to protect your addiction. Although addiction keeps you in pain it keeps you from some pain. If your child is lying to you about something it's because they're trying to hide their use. It's not because they want to hurt you. It's not that they're saying, "Oh, I want to concoct this huge great story about why I can't do this because then that'll be mean to my mother." NO, they're trying to protect their addiction because for them that's all they have right then. Drugs are illegal, so you have to somewhat of a con artist to get drugs and not get in trouble with the law and to keep your abusing them from your family.

Norma: One of the things we hear when we share our stories is and that almost every parent says (and I would say about you, too, and my son Stephen) these are just such bright kids. Sometimes they are the most intelligent ones in our family. They're sensitive. They're creative. They have so much potential. We look at our children who are drug users and we can't believe that they're not smart enough not to do this. It perplexes us and frustrates us. What would you say about that?

Stephanie: I would say everybody I know that is an alcoholic or and addict (and this includes people who I know who are sober and are in AA) are the smartest, most creative people I have ever met in my life. I thing that is one of the things I felt when I walked in the doors of AA. I felt comfortable because here are all these people and I think a lot of addicts don't know what to do with ourselves. Our brains are going constantly. It is one thing if you grow up and you know you want to be a doctor but that is another thing that all of us addicts have in common is we don't know what we want to do. You have all this energy in your head and you just don't know what to do with it. There is documentation that shows that a huge percentage of addicts are ADD. I think the term is used too much, but there is just so much creativity and I think there is not enough outlet. That is not any ones' fault but many don't know what to do with their mind a lot of the time.

Norma: I've also heard drugs is a leveling experience and I think I know what that means. Drugs are no respecter of persons. Is that right? Can you comment on that?

Stephanie: I'm white girl from an upper middle class area of Minneapolis. I'm a pastor's kid. I was addicted to heroin. It is not like someone who lives down in the Minneapolis ghetto and is smoking crack and is on welfare. It doesn't matter. It is interesting at my age people. There are addicts who have been homeless and there are addicts who have made millions of dollars and lost it. It doesn't matter. Drugs don't just pick one group. Nobody is immune to it.

Norma: Looking back over your life, Stephanie, is there anything you think that your parents could have done differently that would have prevented this? Is there something you wished they would have done or something they did you wish they wouldn't have done that influenced you in someway? I know that you don't blame them. I heard you say that and I think you have already said here today but is there any role that your parents played that maybe was very helpful to you in the whole situation with drug usage or was there something that they did that you wished that hadn't done?

Stephanie: I don't think there is anything that they could have done different. I don't think there is anything that I would have wanted them to do. We went to the counselors. We talked about things. I don't think there is anything they could have done differently. I think I had the predisposition to be an addict and probably no matter what this was what was going to happen. I think taking me to counselors and having the evaluations was the right thing to do even though I wasn't happy about at the time. I know drugs weren't allowed and drinking wasn't allowed so they voiced their opinions and I know their opinions but that wasn't going to make a difference in my life.

Norma: Can you tell us what some of the symptoms of drugs use are or what could help a parent recognize drug usage, especially marijuana, because it seems to be real popular among young teens? Sometimes the next step is cocaine and then it sounds like heroine is available now days, too. Sometimes I think what took your parents so long that had to be told by somebody else. Somehow you were able to fool them. You weren't living at home so maybe that is a factor, too. What helps parents recognize the symptoms? What would you say at this point?

Stephanie: I don't know. It is important to watch for changes in behavior. I guess if your kids are still at home and they're doing well at school and then they change and are not doing well or they're happy and then they become depressed those could be signs. I don't know. Or, if they have a job and then they quit going to their job or they start skipping school, things like that.

Norma: Can you recognize when some is using drugs or is high?

Stephanie: Can I? It's interesting. Sometimes people come in at my work. I can see if someone's been smoking marijuana because his or her eyes are all glassy. I don't think that my mom wouldn't recognize it. But I can tell because I've been there. They have this glassy look and dopey smile on their face. But I think it's really hard to tell. I think that's the thing that's so insidious is that you can't always tell. There's not always going to be sign on the forehead saying, "I'm stoned".

Norma: One of the other things I wonder about when our kids, pastors' kids, use drugs is this: "Where's God in this?" Is He in your head, in your heart, in your mind when you are using drugs? You know all about God, you pray to God and God's been a part of your home life. What happens to God in this process—in the users' experience?

Stephanie: In my experience, God was always in the back of my head. But it was always, "Oh God, if you just let me get out of this situation. Please!" Honestly I didn't like church, I still don't like church very much. I think that I have an incredibly spiritual relationship with God right now since I got sober, a closer relationship than I have ever had with God. And I always knew that God was there. I just didn't know how to find Him. I think that's one thing as pastors' kids that is a positive thing. If you are raised in the church you have that, you always know. You don't want God there when you're getting high. I felt guilty sometimes. Its interesting at the worst times I'd say, "Oh, please God. Help me get out of this." I think that if your child knows about God and what you've taught them and shown them what you believe that they know God's there but I'd also say, don't push it.

Norma: This might be too personal or too hard. You don't have to answer it if you don't want to. I've cried this out in my own heart as a parent of a child using drugs. I've heard you say that your pain took you to using drugs and feeling so much better. And my feeling as a parent is always, "Wasn't our love and our home enough to fill that hole for our kids/" Why was there pain in a kid's life, someone like you who was so loved by your parents?

Stephanie: Um, I think that for me there was a reason for this. There was a reason that I had to go through all of this and that something positive had to come out of it. And, I think that God gives you parents that you can learn from and that God gives parents kids that they can learn from. And I think that my mom and dad would say that's true. Maybe that's the hardest thing for

a parent to accept. I can't say that because I'm not a parent. But, no matter what you do as a parent, it's not about you. The child is making a choice. God is going to love your child no matter what. As a parent you are going to love your child but your love is not going to be enough. You can't fix that and that is just how it is.

Norma: Why do you do these interviews, Stephie? Wouldn't it be better for you now that you're on the road to recovery to just forget this and not have to go over this story so often?

Stephanie: I don't do this because I like it. I do it to help other people. I think the first time I got caught with marijuana it was a huge secret. Nobody knew which I think was very hard. It was hard for me because I thought it just makes the secret worse. But I also think that since this all came out—since I got sober, since my dad has talked to other pastors—just how many people in the ministry whose kids do use drugs or alcohol. And, I think about how many of those pastors don't talk about it because they're scared they'll lose their job or they're ashamed or they ask how can they lead their congregation if they can't even handle their own kids. Also, I have to do something positive with the negative things that have happened in my life. So I do this to help other people. It helps me, too. I don't necessarily think back on every thing that I did every day but I can't forget that where I came from. If I don't remember where I came from and I don't try to look forward and try to help other people then nothing positive can come out of it.

Norma: I guess this is our last question. Tell us a little bit about your life today. How are you feeling about yourself and your life and your hopes and dreams for the future. How's your relationship with your Mom and Dad and God. Just bring us up to date about how you're doing now?

Stephanie: I'm good. I live in Scottsdale, Arizona. I finally admitted that I live there. It's been 4 years. I have a roommate who I met in AA. I see my mom and Dad. I talk to my Dad on the phone 'cause he's a phone caller. I see my mom a couple times a week. I work at nights at Starbucks. I call myself the dorm mother to all my college kids at Starbucks and that's interesting because they all know my story. I go to the University of Phoenix. I have one year left and then I'll have my bachelor's degree in Human Services, which is counseling, social work, psychology all kind of combined. What do I hope to do? Oh my. I still don't know what I want to do. Probably working with teenagers or counseling or something. Today my relationship with God is bigger than I ever thought it would be, bigger than I hoped it would be. I can't tell you how many times a day I pray. Sometimes when I'm at work I just go into the bathroom and get down on my knees and pray if someone's driving me crazy. So, I feel like I'm right where I'm supposed to be. All I have is today and all I worry about is today and what's the next right thing to do.

Norma: Stephie, thank you so much and congratulations on your recovery. I know it's been a courageous journey for you. It's so hopeful for us. You are the embodiment of hope for us today. We just appreciate you giving that gift to us as parents with children that we really care about.