

## Putting Drug Use behind You

by Stephanie Vawter

**Mark:** Stephanie, take us through your journey a little bit. We want to ultimately get to recovery; but before we can appreciate that, take us back to what it was like as far as you remember growing up as a P.K. (a pastor's kid).

**Stephanie:** Well, first off, let me say I don't blame my drug use on being a pastor's kid. Not at all. It was my choice and I got caught up in the drug world. That being said, I think growing up as a pastor's kid has a lot of stress. I don't think a lot of people realize that. And I don't think even a lot of pastors realize that. And I don't think necessarily that the kids realize that. But you are looked at as being an example for other people. Sometimes the Sunday school teachers expect you to know the answers. Sometimes the other kids expect you to know the answers. I remember a girlfriend of mine in church who was a little bit wacky and maybe a little bit wild. Her dad said to me, "I'm so glad you're being friends with my daughter because you are a good influence on her." So I think when you are a pastor's kid, you have two choices: you either become sort of the perfect child and memorize the entire Bible and do what everyone expects of you, or you become sort of the prodigal son or daughter.

**Mark:** Take me inside what you remember from his saying, "I'm so glad you're my daughter's friend." Did that make you feel pressure or what?

**Stephanie:** I think I thought, "Gee, he really doesn't know me at all. I guess I'm playing the part well."

**Mark:** Was this high school or what?

**Stephanie:** This was junior high. I do think a lot of pastors' kids play a part. They pretend. I don't know if pretend is the right word, but they act courteous and nice and greet people. I remember at church as a kid walking around the church. I would talk to people. I was friendly with people, but I felt that responsibility. I know my brother, on the other hand, did not feel that responsibility and he didn't talk to people. He walked around in his own little world. But I felt as if I was playing a part.

**Mark:** What kind of dialogue was there with your dad and mom about that?

**Stephanie:** None. We didn't talk about that because I don't think they realized there was any issue. And I don't know that I thought there was an issue. I just thought that was something I was supposed to do and I did it.

**Mark:** Yeah. Kind of the expectation. When did you get introduced to drugs? When did that temptation enter your life?

**Stephanie:** Probably the first introduction would have been when I was about 14. That was to marijuana.

**Mark:** Living in Minnesota right?

**Stephanie:** Correct.

**Mark:** Your dad was pastor at a suburban Minneapolis church?

**Stephanie:** Correct. I was introduced to marijuana and I really enjoyed it.

**Mark:** Do you remember at all anything passing through your mind, like, “I shouldn’t do this.” What were the reasons that maybe would have kept you from doing it?

**Stephanie:** I don’t know if anything would have kept me from doing it. I think it was my curiosity. I wanted to see what it was like, and once I did try marijuana I sort of felt relieved from the internal pain I was feeling.

**Mark:** Were there any mental obstacles that ran through your mind to possibly say no to drugs? You said you don’t think anything would have kept you from that.

**Stephanie:** I don’t think so. I think that’s my makeup. I don’t deny that “Say No to Drugs” program works. I think it does work for a lot of kids. But I think I had to push the envelope and part of that was doing things that people said I shouldn’t. I wanted to test it for myself. If someone tells me it’s black, then I want to try to say it’s white.

**Mark:** Some people in terms of their concern about marijuana say this is an entry drug. That kids can “poopoo” this and have different defenses about it. But the fact of the matter is, a lot those experts and active anti-drug speakers point out that this is an entry level; and if you hook here that can be something that leads you down the road to other more dangerous drugs.

**Stephanie:** I believe that’s true. They do

**Mark:** Is that what happened in your life?

**Stephanie:** That was the case with me. I started using marijuana and at that time I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the high. I want to explain that. I believe and I know to this day that I am an alcoholic and a drug addict. Part of being an alcoholic and a drug addict is not really feeling like you fit in your body. When I smoked that marijuana, I felt like I fit. I felt like I was whole and I didn’t have the worries that I did. But, not everyone is like that. I don’t believe that every kid who smokes marijuana is going to end up becoming a heroin addict. That’s not the case at all. But with me I think it was inevitable that I would eventually go on to bigger and “better” drugs, as it were.

**Mark:** Pretty much you kept that from your parents. They didn’t know that?

**Stephanie:** Oh, no. I was very good at hiding it.

**Mark:** Now, some people might say, “Man, how naive must they have been? How could they not have known?” By their checking the redness of your eyes or smelling your clothing, how did you conceal all that?

**Stephanie:** Yeah. I mean addicts are very good liars. That was sort of my job. As I told my dad when he asked how he could have been so stupid (his term) to miss my addiction, “You can not be a successful addict unless you are a great liar.”

**Mark:** That’s an interesting point you make. The addicts, meaning not just drug addicts, right? Addiction is addiction whether it is drugs or alcohol.

**Stephanie:** Yes, any kind of addiction is harmful.

**Mark:** Because you’re lying to yourself first and foremost. You’re lying to yourself saying, “This isn’t hurting me.”

**Stephanie:** Right. And you believe it yourself. I think you become such a good liar because you need to hide your use, because that is what is giving you your only joy. Even though joy is not the right word, but for lack of a better word, it will work. It is joy at that point. You’ll do anything to

hide your use and abuse in order to have that joy. I think that if you believe the lie, then it's easier to make other people believe the lie.

**Mark:** So take me through kind of the Reader's Digest version here. Entry-level marijuana at 14; parents don't discover; what more serious drugs did you get into as long as you were in their household?

**Stephanie:** That was it pretty much, marijuana, alcohol.

**Mark:** All right, what happened to Stephanie Vawter after high school?

**Stephanie:** I moved out about a week after I turned 18 and moved to another state to work. I met some people who were a little older than I was, a little more experienced and little bit more on the edge. From there, I started experimenting with other drugs: LSD, speed, cocaine. Crystal meth wasn't around when I was 18 or 19, but eventually I experimented with that as well.

**Mark:** That's a huge problem in the upper Midwest right now. What can you say to parents who may have a concern that their child is a user of that or maybe, as was your case, parents who just don't know.

**Stephanie:** Number one: I would say if you suspect a problem and if you ask your kid, a lot of the time your kid is not going to tell you the truth. I would say try some sort of intervening, counseling, or talking to your school guidance counselor or a drug counselor. Talk to someone who's been there. If you have a friend whose child has gone through using drugs, ask him. From the parent's point of view, my dad has a better grasp on how to do that. But if you suspect your child is using, don't ignore it. That's the biggest thing.

**Mark:** And again, your dad's website, <notalone.org>. People can get more information there. He is a minister and he has reached out to pastors. If someone's listening and he's not a pastor, could he still benefit from what your dad has to say?

**Stephanie:** Oh, certainly, because first and foremost, he is a parent. He's a parent whose daughter almost died using drugs. Whether he's a pastor or not doesn't change the fact that he's a parent.

**Mark:** So you started to use a variety of different drugs. Where were you?

**Stephanie:** Different odd jobs: pizza delivery, receptionist and a waitress.

**Mark:** How did you get your drugs?

**Stephanie:** Just from people I knew. Once you get into those circles, it's very easy to get drugs. Drug dealers are friendly with the drug users.

**Mark:** At which point, if at all, did you get into dealing?

**Stephanie:** It's interesting that you ask. I never thought that I dealt drugs until I got sober. Someone asked me had I ever taken money for drugs. I said, "Well, sure" and he said "Well, then you've dealt."

**Mark:** What do you mean by taking money? Why didn't it occur to you that that was dealing?

**Stephanie:** Well, it's the attitude. To be considered a dealer, you had to be selling large quantities and having people come to your house day and night and driving a flashy car and having a cell phone and that type of thing. And I had just sold drugs to my friends. If I had drugs

and someone wanted some, then I would sell to them. It hadn't crossed my mind and my rationale at that point to think that that was dealing drugs.

**Mark:** Now take us down the journey into your twenties.

**Stephanie:** At about 23, almost 24, someone introduced me to heroin. I had been doing all these various drugs. Interestingly enough, the entire time from 19 up until 23 or 24, I had been using marijuana daily. For people who say that marijuana is not harmful and that you can't become addicted to it, I was addicted. I don't believe it was a physical addiction but a mental addiction. I was dependant on that marijuana. I think one of the dangers with marijuana is that, because it's a depressant it lulls you into sort of a not caring attitude. You think you're enjoying it. But it really zaps you of any desire to do anything. I didn't want to go to school. I didn't want to work. I basically just wanted to stay at home and smoke pot. And that's what I did for three years. I worked off and on but had no ambition. So, I had been smoking pot and experimenting with other drugs when they were available. Then someone introduced me to heroin. I don't want people to think that their kid is smoking pot and so instantly he is going to start shooting heroin. For me, it was several years of a progression of searching for a bigger and better high, which I wasn't getting with any of the drugs that I was trying. And I was looking for an escape. That's what I wanted, something to make me not feel. And I think that's what every addict wants. They don't want to have to feel. They just want to be numb. Someone introduced me to heroin. I tried it and it gave me that feeling of numbness. I wasn't thinking about anything, I wasn't worried about anything; nothing hurt; I was just numb. And that was the feeling I had been looking for my whole life. I'd been looking for that feeling. From that moment, I wanted to do it again. At first, I just did it on the weekends. Then I started doing it during the week. This progression was over about three months. I went from using it on the weekend to "Okay, well it's Thursday I think I'll do it today," to "Okay, let's do it Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday," to every day. And then, even though I was doing it every day, I wasn't addicted to it in my way of thinking. I was just choosing to do it because it made me feel so good. I was smoking it in the beginning but that only lasted about three weeks. Then the person I was using it with said, "You should try using a needle. It's a lot better." I did and that was all it took.

**Mark:** Is this tough for you to share?

**Stephanie:** I don't want to glorify it in any way. I want to make sure that people don't think that I'm sharing it to glorify it in any way or to get any accolades. It's just to make some difference and to help other people.

**Mark:** I think of the parents out there, possibly users, but also the parents who may have kids who are involved. They need to open their eyes. So more and more you injected the heroin. Then what?

**Stephanie:** Then it was a year of this madness. About the first six months I was using heroin, I was still able to function somewhat. I wasn't working but I was still seeing my friends. I was active. I was doing things. I even went on a trip with my family, that sort of thing. And then about six months into it, I stopped caring. Then it was just all out using and trying to be high all the time and searching for that high and trying to find the drugs, trying to find the money to get the drugs.

**Mark:** And all this time your parent's didn't know?

**Stephanie:** Correct.

**Mark:** And people again can say, "Man, how could they not know?"

**Stephanie:** Well, here's what I did. They lived in Arizona. I lived in another state at the time. At that point I'm 24 years old, so it's not like they talk to me every day. They'd call once a week. I didn't answer the phone. I had my answering machine on. So they'd call and I'd call them back

when I was relatively coherent. I would talk to them 15 minutes or so, tell them that everything was fine, tell them what they wanted to hear and hang up. That kept my secret going.

**Mark:** But along came a trip to Mexico that your brother knew about. Now when did your brother know about the drug usage or did he know well in advance here?

**Stephanie:** He had known that I had been using drugs. He didn't know the extent of it. With any brother and sister, any siblings, I would lay down my life for my brother, that's just how it is. We had secrets from our parents and we kept them like any sibling would do. So he had known I was using marijuana. He knew I had experimented with a few other drugs, but that was all he knew. He didn't know the extent of it. He came to visit me about six months before I got sober. It was obvious to him that I was completely hooked on drugs. But I convinced him that I was going to stop and that it was going to be over and everything was going to be fine and I was not going to use drugs anymore. He didn't have any reason not to believe me. So he thought that was the end of it. He thought it was a phase and that I was going to quit and why should he not believe me? Who wants to think that their sister is a junkie?

**Mark:** So how did he know about the trip to Mexico?

**Stephanie:** What happened is, I had moved a drug dealer into my house. He was living in the basement apartment. We went to Mexico to buy drugs.

**Mark:** At this point you did not have a job? This was what you were doing?

**Stephanie:** Correct. And we ran out of money. I didn't have any money to get home so I called my brother from Mexico and asked him to wire me some money. He obviously asked me why I was in Mexico and what was I doing. Being a smart kid, he thought, "Hmmm, Mexico, a lot of heroin there." He did wire me money to get home but he knew that I had been lying to him at that point.

**Mark:** And what's your brother's name?

**Stephanie:** His name is Michael. I think he realized that I really was in danger.

**Mark:** And this is when now?

**Stephanie:** This is July of 1997. He did wire me the money. He wasn't happy about it. I believe he was worried about me. But I also believe he didn't know what to do. He was in another state from where I lived. He was a college student at the time and he knew that no matter what he said, it wasn't going to change my mind. I'm his older sister and he's always looked up to me, and here I am strung out on heroin in Mexico. He didn't know what he could do, so he sent me the money because he wanted me to get home and be safe. So what happened is, I spent that money on drugs and didn't end up getting home. I called my aunt to wire me some money. I gave her some song and dance story. She did send me the money, which I did use to get home, but she also called my dad, her brother, and said, "I think something is wrong."

**Mark:** I thought there was a phone call from your brother, too, to your parents.

**Stephanie:** After my aunt called my mom and dad, they called my brother. They said, "We don't want to break any confidences between you two; but if something is wrong with Stephanie, you really need to tell us because we're worried for her life." Michael did some checking to confirm my addiction and then called my parents and told them. The drug dealer that I was with at the time and I got into an argument. I left and drove home from Mexico. It's about a 16-hour drive. I drove home all by myself. I didn't have a stereo in my car because I sold it in Mexico for drugs. I barely had enough money for gas to get home. I got home to my house. You have to understand that this entire drive home I was thinking and I realized that I had to do something but I didn't know what I needed to do.

**Mark:** You made the long 16-hour trek back from Mexico, barely had enough money for gas, and didn't have a car stereo.

**Stephanie:** So 16 hours in the car by yourself, you got a lot of time to think. At this point I just was broken. My spirit was broken; my soul, I felt like my soul was gone.

**Mark:** Safe to say there were a lot of tears in the car on the way home?

**Stephanie:** Tears inside. I still wasn't ready to let those tears out on the outside. I didn't know what to do. I was thinking on the way home, "I've got to get some help. Maybe when I get home, I'll call someplace and I can go get help for drugs." But interestingly enough, I didn't ever think once, "Maybe I'll call my mom and dad and say, 'I have a problem.'"

**Mark:** Why? Why didn't you think that?

**Stephanie:** Because I was ashamed that I had a problem with drugs and I didn't want to burden them with it.

**Mark:** But somebody might say, "They're your parents and you know they love you unconditionally."

**Stephanie:** Right. But the worse thing for me to wish upon them was that their child was a drug addict. I didn't want to put them through that. My rationale at that point was that I didn't want to put them through it because maybe I thought they'd be ashamed, which is exactly the opposite of how they responded when they discovered I was addicted to heroin.

**Mark:** I can understand, clearly.

**Stephanie:** So I just really didn't know what I was going to do. I was obviously at a crossroads and I had to do something. I couldn't go on the way I was going. I arrived home and had been home for about an hour, when the front door opened to my house and in walked my mom and dad.

**Mark:** Now, they lived in Arizona and you lived in?

**Stephanie:** I was in Colorado. You have to understand my dismay that they had just walked through the door. I was in my bedroom. They sat down on my bed and my dad said, "Stephanie, we know you're on drugs. We want you to come get help." And just like that I said, "All right." And I believe that it was a "God moment" that God put them there at the right moment and that I was ready at that moment. Had it been a day earlier, had it been a day later, I don't know if I would have said, "Yes." And, that's important to know that when you do intervene with people, they're not always going to be willing to get help.

**Mark:** Stephanie, we hear about trying to overcome cigarette addiction. What is behind trying to overcome heroin addiction?

**Stephanie:** First off, for the physical addiction, you have to get through the detox part of that. I recommend going to a detox center for that. It's difficult to do it on your own in your home. People can do that, but you need, I believe, some supervision for that.

**Mark:** How long does it take to detox?

**Stephanie:** Four days, to two days, to forty-eight hours. It depends on the person. I had tried several times to do it by myself. Usually I got to the 24-hour mark and then just started using again because the pain was so great. Interestingly enough, the last time I went into detox, I didn't

have any of the symptoms. None. I kept waiting to get sick. I kept waiting for the pain and it never happened. And I believe that was God. I believe God touched me and said, "Look, I'm giving you this chance. Take it."

**Mark:** From the sounds of it, some of your closer moments with God, I don't know if since, but at least up to that point, came during that week.

**Stephanie:** Yes, they did.

**Mark:** So you're saying God meets us at our lowest place?

**Stephanie:** I believe so. I think everything happens for a reason. I don't think God makes things happen, but I think He comes to us at certain points. You can choose to listen to Him and say, "Wow, thanks," or you can damn Him, as it were, which a lot of people do. And I chose to see Him in that situation when I was desperate and my parents walked into my bedroom.

**Mark:** What does your recovery look like today?

**Stephanie:** Well, from detox I went to get professional treatment. I began attending 12-step meetings daily. I attended them daily for about the first two years and then pretty much every other day. I have 44 months sober now, and by sober I mean that I haven't drank or used any drugs since then.

**Mark:** That's a long time. I mean it all happens one day at a time, but there was a point in your life where that would have sounded ludicrous to say.

**Stephanie:** Oh, definitely. There are points today where I say "Wow, will I stay sober the rest of my life?" I can't look at it that way. I have to look at it as staying sober today. All I have is today.

**Mark:** It's kind of like walking a tightrope between two very tall buildings. You're way up, you can't look to the left, you can't look to the right and you can't really look behind you. You've got to keep your eye in front of you, don't you?

**Stephanie:** Correct.

**Mark:** Now what do I know about tightrope walking? I'm just saying that it seems to me you can get distracted. Even Stephanie Vawter gets elevated by thinking, "Wow, I've made it a long time." If you allow that to happen, that seems like the entry point for failure.

**Stephanie:** Right. And that's the danger of saying, I am cured. Just the other day I was thinking, "Oh, wow! I've been sober this long. I wonder if I had a drink, what would happen?" That's the addiction talk. That's the addiction saying, "Sure you can have one drink and that won't lead to drugs and that won't lead you right back into the depths of despair."

**Mark:** And as you know, because it sounds like you've worked recovery pretty extensively, that sobriety and recovery are different things. It is one thing to be sober. But are you moving ahead? Are you growing in character change?

**Stephanie:** That's true. I didn't get sober just to stay the same, to be the same person I was when I was using drugs. I need my life to have a purpose and to work towards something.

**Mark:** How old are you now? What are you doing now in Arizona?

**Stephanie:** I'm 29 now. I work in the food service industry while I'm going to school. I have about a year left to get my bachelor's in counseling and I would like to work with teenagers, whether it be drug counseling or just sort of peer counseling, facilitating interaction among teens.

**Mark:** What's been your comments to your dad about some of the conferences and the website and trying to reach out to parents of drug and alcohol-using kids?

**Stephanie:** I think that he's using his painful experience that I caused him for good to help other people. I think you have a choice when you're faced with something like this. You can let it be a burden. You can be ashamed about it. You can hide it. Or, you can take it and turn it into something positive and help other people.

**Mark:** Have you spoken at those conferences or just showed up there?

**Stephanie:** I spoke at the first conference he held.

**Mark:** Are there a lot of hurting parents out there with kids who are in trouble?

**Stephanie:** There really are. The more you share about it the more people feel the freedom to come out and talk about it.

**Mark:** Who are drug users? Before you answer, let me say it seems to me that people think they're the trouble makers. They're the bad kids. They're the ones that were the freaks in high school, and yet as I hear your story, you didn't come from a bad home. It's not that your parents were divorced. You're a P.K., a pastor's kid. As you've already talked about and as we kind of know we put those kids up on a shelf. They're going to be the role models, the examples with the high expectations. Who are drug users?

**Stephanie:** Drug users are everyone. They're college graduates, high school dropouts, they're everyone. It's not the bad kids. Drug users are people who are hurting and they're not just the delinquents. I looked like I had everything going from that side. When we came home from school my mom was home to give us cookies. My dad was successful in his ministry. So, it doesn't matter. It's not just the kids who are from single parent families. It's not just the kids who live in the poor side of town. It's everyone. It's mothers, fathers, and its kids. Addiction is not about how good you are or what you've accomplished or how much money you have or how thin you are or anything like that.

**Mark:** Well, Stephanie, I really appreciate you sharing your story. It's a privilege for me as a Christian talk show host to know that this is the first time you've shared this story to this extent. God's best to you.