

A Hero's Journey



By Will Malmo

When I was 19 years old, I got a DUI. I was devastated the night it occurred, but the decade after was much worse. It had a domino effect in my life that led me into a depression so severe I was on the verge of suicide.

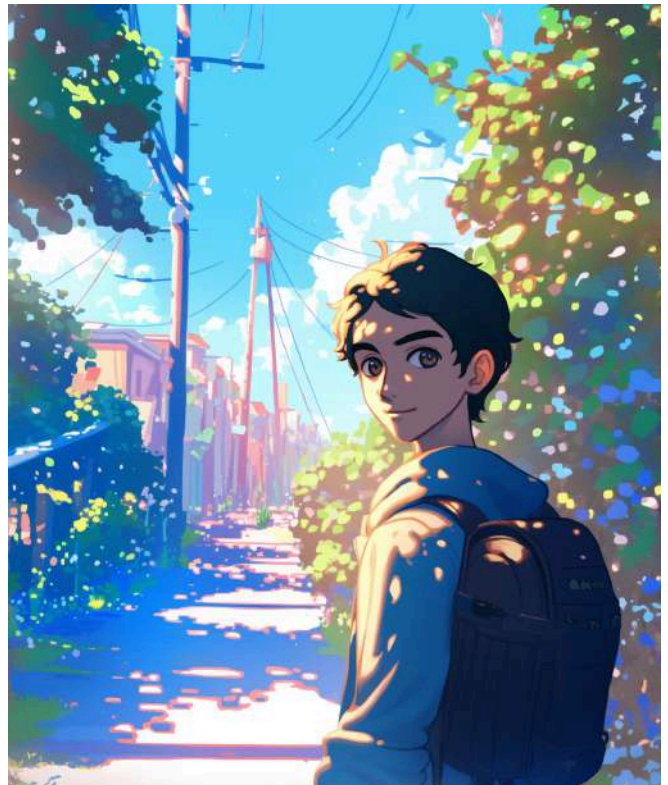
The Ordinary World

Before the DUI, my life was pretty ordinary. Growing up in Stratford, Ontario, I had friends, played sports, and lived what many people would consider a normal childhood. My parents divorced when I was six, which was difficult for me at the time, but I adjusted. The one thing that set me apart from my friends was that I was adopted. For the most part, this didn't register as a big deal to me, however I knew that my family was different from others which I sometimes struggled with as I mostly just wanted to fit in and be normal.

School came easy to me at first. I earned good grades without trying hard, but my real focus was always on making friends and being liked. As I moved into middle and high school, this priority took a toll. My grades slipped from A's to D's, and even though I felt ashamed, I didn't care enough to change. The approval and validation I received from my friends mattered much more to me than academic success.

In the summer of Grade 11, things got worse for me schoolwise when I started drinking. Partying became my identity, filling a void I didn't fully understand. Going to parties was where I felt accepted and normal, like I fit in. The more I drank, the more people seemed to like me. For the remainder of high school, getting drunk and partying with friends wasn't just a pastime—it was my way of life.

Looking back, this was when I began a slow, downwards spiral towards disaster, but I didn't have the foresight to see where I was headed.



The Call to Adventure

It happened in a split second. As I sat handcuffed in the back of a police car, I knew my life would never be the same. It was Thanksgiving weekend of 2009, and I had come home to Stratford during my first year away at university. What began as a typical night

drinking at a friend's farm ended in a moment that would alter the course of my life.

As the night began, I remember the farm being alive with music and laughter, but my memory blurs as the night wore on. I don't remember if I drove home or caught a ride back into town with someone else. Either way, when I got back to my dad's house, I was



hungry so I decided to drive to Tim Hortons. I made it there without an issue, pulled into the drive-through, and was waiting behind a few cars. I was annoyed that the line wasn't moving, so I decided to back out of the drive-through to park the car and walk in. As I was backing out, I saw red and blue lights flashing in my rearview mirror. Two policemen got out of their car.

I had no hope of hiding the fact that I was intoxicated. They breathalyzed me, handcuffed me, and threw me in the back of the police car. Everything seemed like it was happening in slow

motion. Minutes felt like hours as horrible thoughts raced through my mind. The cops drove me to the police station and put me in a small room, still handcuffed. After what seemed like an eternity, I was told to call my dad to come get me. When he arrived, he wasn't just mad; he had a look on his face that I had never seen before. It was a heartbreaking mixture of concern and disappointment.

I didn't just lose my license that night. I lost a part of myself that I wouldn't get back for years—the confidence and optimism I had in childhood. Although I couldn't fully grasp it in the moment, it was the beginning of a long, painful journey to rebuild my life.

Refusal of the Call

After receiving the DUI, it was as if a magician had done a trick and, all of a sudden, I disappeared from my friend group. I know they wondered about me and were confused as to what happened. One friend called me out publicly over FaceBook, openly asking where I'd gone and urging me to reconnect. Instead of facing him and the rest of my friends, I withdrew further out of shame and embarrassment.

As months turned into years, I drifted more and more from my high school friends. I was living in Rexdale, a suburb of Toronto, where my life revolved around partying and drinking just as



much as before, but now weed had also taken centre stage. I became a pothead, smoking five to ten times a day. Smoking was a way for me to escape the emotional pain I was feeling, but it came at a high price. Anxiety took hold of me whenever I was high, making even basic interactions stressful. Instead of confronting my feelings, I retreated further, letting the isolation deepen.

Over time, my smoking became less of a habit and more of a dependency. It consumed my time, my energy, and money that I didn't have. It left no room for growth or forward movement—just a haze of avoidance. The isolation tightened its grip on me, and my confidence faded with each passing year. All this just to sidestep the one thing I feared the most: facing my friends, my feelings, and the consequences of my DUI.

Meeting with the Mentor

I wouldn't have made it through those first few years if it weren't for my mom and dad. My mom provided unwavering love and support, while my dad encouraged me and, from a young age, had instilled in me a belief that I could accomplish anything I set my mind to.

For years after the DUI, I lived as a recluse, hiding from everyone out of embarrassment and shame. This self-imposed isolation was my way of both protecting and punishing myself, but it left me completely alone with no outlet for the pain I was experiencing. The only exception was with my mom, who was a constant source of love and support. Spending time at her home in Toronto provided me a much needed respite from the

overwhelming shame I felt. Her home, always beautiful and inviting, paired with her presence, was a warm, comforting space I could go to heal.



In my final years of high school, my dad and I had a strained relationship. I barely spoke to him when I was in Grade 11 and didn't speak to him at all in Grade 12. Things began to improve after I left for university, though we still weren't on great terms when I got the DUI. Despite this, my dad never stopped supporting me. What helped me the most during that period was the belief I had in myself which he

instilled in me from childhood. Growing up, he consistently encouraged me to believe I could accomplish anything I set my mind to. Even though my confidence was shattered after the DUI, that belief never fully left me. His early encouragement was the reason I held on to the hope that I would one day recover.

Crossing of the First Threshold

The first real step I took to get past the DUI came with the *Back On Track* program, a mandatory, one-day remedial course designed by the provincial government for people convicted of impaired driving. It was an embarrassing hurdle I had to overcome to get my license back, but it was more than that—it was the first time I had to confront my feelings about what had happened.

It was the summer of 2011, over a year and a half after my DUI, and I was struggling to get by. Living in Rexdale and smoking weed constantly, I had pushed almost everyone out of my life. The morning of the course, a new wave of shame and embarrassment washed over me.

The course was held at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto. Sitting in an unfamiliar classroom filled with strangers, each of us carrying the same invisible burden, it felt like I was being kicked while I was already down. For the preceding year and a half, I had been beating myself up relentlessly, and now, here I was, forced to reckon with the shame of my past in a public setting. Still, I knew this was the first step I had to take if I ever wanted my life to go back to normal.



The course itself wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. The instructor was clearly empathetic; he understood the weight we all carried into that classroom. Still, there were moments when his words stung, particularly during the warnings about the dangers of drinking and driving. I had already resolved never to make that mistake again, but his tone made me feel as though I was still on trial. Despite my resentment, I knew he was right. By the end of the day, I breathed a sigh of relief and was happy to have taken a small but significant step toward rebuilding my life.

Tests, Allies and Enemies

The first year after getting the DUI was one of the darkest periods of my life, especially during the summer holidays at home in Stratford. My girlfriend at the time, Tory, became my anchor, countering the weight of my own critical inner voice.

Returning home that summer filled me with dread. While others looked forward to reconnecting with old friends, I was consumed by anxiety, worrying about awkward conversations I might have with anyone I encountered from high school. I imagined their questions—“*What happened to you? Where have you been?*”—forcing me to explain how I screwed up my life. Picturing their pitying facial expressions was unbearable, so I spent the entire summer hiding in my bedroom.

I was my own worst enemy during that time. I smoked weed multiple times a day, which only worsened my situation, but it felt like my only option to numb the pain. Looking back, I realize that confronting my feelings head-on was the only way I could have truly moved forward, but my reliance on weed delayed that process and deepened the stigma and shame I felt.

That summer, my girlfriend Tory was like a lifeboat in the middle of a storm. We started dating just before the summer holiday, and although I spent my days working in a factory, smoking weed non-stop, and shutting myself in my room for eleven weeks straight, Tory’s nightly FaceTime calls gave me hope. Without her, I’m not sure I would have made it through that summer—at the very least, I would have been in far worse shape by the start of the next school year. It was my last summer living in Stratford, and it was a miserable one.



Approach to the Inmost Cave

By my mid-twenties, I thought I had moved on from the DUI. I wasn’t drinking or smoking nearly as much, and on the surface, my life seemed normal. But in reality, I was more isolated than ever. Between the ages of 25 and 27, I essentially had no friends and began slipping into the darkest period of my life.

In high school, I not only had friends but had multiple *groups* of friends. My core group of 15–20 buddies from elementary school first bonded over sports which led to us partying together in high school, bringing us even closer. I also connected with a group of musical and theater kids, and had different groups of girls welcome me. I was fairly popular and was more-or-less accepted by whatever clique I wanted to hang out with.



At the time, I didn't realize how much this validation shaped my sense of self-worth. Being accepted by others made me feel like I had value.

By the time I was 25, my life was unrecognizable from my high school years. I was completely alone, and the most painful part was knowing that I had done it to myself. The DUI had set everything in motion, but I had made the damage far worse by cutting off my friends and retreating into a foggy haze of constant weed smoking. The isolation was becoming unbearable, stripping away any sense of value I once had. I didn't just feel

worthless—I felt like I brought negative value to the world, like I literally made the world a worse place by being in it.

I craved connection but had no confidence left in myself, and others seemed to sense it. Years without meaningful friendships, combined with the fog of weed, had made me socially awkward. Deep down, I believed I wasn't worth talking to, which was clear in my social interactions. I came across as needy, which only pushed people further away. The harder I tried to connect with others, the more painfully obvious it became that I was completely alone.

The Ordeal

Eight years after the DUI, at 27 years old, I hit the lowest point of my life. Nearly a decade had passed since I'd been arrested, but the consequences were still reverberating through my life. By the summer of 2017, I was more isolated than ever, dealing with despair so immense that I began to consider suicide.

On the surface, it seemed like I had moved on. Years had passed since I'd spoken to my high school friends, and I told myself I'd made peace with their absence. Day-to-day, I didn't feel the same feelings of embarrassment and shame I felt in the immediate aftermath of the DUI. Yet, deep down, I knew that experience at 19 had shaped the misery I felt at 27.

Before the DUI, I didn't have a clear plan for life after school, but I was confident that I'd figure it out. Despite my partying habits, I truly believed I was a good person at heart and that things would therefore work out for me in the end. After the DUI, that belief

disintegrated. My confidence vanished, leaving behind only self-doubt.

The DUI didn't just change my life—it fundamentally changed how I viewed myself. I became a recluse, identifying as a failure and wasting my potential. The optimism I had in myself evaporated, replaced by the belief that I was a bad person. I stopped being surprised when bad things happened to me; instead, I expected it.

Throughout my mid-twenties, I struggled to get ahead, weighed down by the belief that I was undeserving of good things. By 27, my life mirrored my thoughts—isolated, friendless, and directionless. After spending over a year and a half at home alone, a deeper depression took hold. I began to have conversations with myself about ending my life.



Reward

That summer was the hardest period of my life, but two forces pulled me through: the kids I worked with at my job, and my first few steps towards self-development. When suicidal thoughts came up in my darkest moments, those thoughts were fought back when I considered how my actions would affect the juniors I coached.

I could still vividly remember the pain I felt when the junior I was closest to, Danya, died suddenly during my first year at the squash club I worked at. Having experienced the pain of grief firsthand after losing him, imagining how my death could impact the kids I coached kept me from going through with it. I cared too much for them to put them through that type of pain. The truth is, the love I had for them was the primary reason I didn't kill myself. Their impact on me was profound; they motivated me as I took my first steps towards self-development and helped me find a way out of the darkness.



Though my journey into self-development wasn't specifically for them, the kids were always in the back of my mind pushing me forward. Before my journey began, I knew I needed to make a change but didn't know where to start. For some reason, a persistent thought kept coming up – '*Start reading.*' It seemed simple but productive, so on July 31st, 2017 I bought a few books that were interesting and got started. Over the following

weeks, I slowly became a better reader, progressing through chapters faster and with more enjoyment. For the first time in years, I started to feel a small amount of pride in myself. Part of me thought that reading was so small and insignificant that it was trivial, but in retrospect it was a major milestone on my path out of the dark place I was in and towards a brighter future.

The Road Back

After the DUI knocked me off course, recovering the optimism and confidence I had in myself as a kid was a long, painful journey. My biggest hurdle was not comparing myself to others, especially when I felt so far behind in life. Instead, I needed to focus on the progress I'd made—recognizing and celebrating the growth I achieved since my mid-twenties and focusing on the person I was becoming.

If I had a crystal ball and could see how my life would have turned out if I hadn't got a DUI, I imagine it would look better—closer to what I see in the lives of my old friends. Maybe I wouldn't have lost touch with them, or isolated myself for a decade, or fallen so far behind in life. But it's also possible that my life might have ended up worse—I may have driven drunk again and killed myself or someone else. While it's possible that my life could have been easier without the DUI, I've realized that dwelling on the *'what-ifs'* doesn't help. What matters now is how I move forward.

Even before the DUI, I was drifting away from my genuine self. In my mid-teens, drinking and partying had turned into my identity, but deep down, I knew that way of living wasn't in line with who I truly was. After starting to work on self-development, I began to feel more like my authentic self in my thirties than I did throughout my entire twenties—ironically, closer to the version of me I remember from childhood. Today, I have a clearer sense of my purpose and direction in life. I've begun to surround myself with like-minded people who share my values and ambitions.



The Resurrection

One clear transformation I've experienced since the DUI has been a shift away from hedonism and towards taking on responsibility for myself and the world around me. The

most valuable lesson I've learned from this chapter of my life is that despite feeling like a failure for years, I have control over who I identify as with my actions and, by committing to self-development, I don't have to identify as a failure moving forward.

I used to believe that the greatest thing in life was getting drunk and partying. Now, I find much more meaning in working on self-development with the hope that improving myself will inspire the kids I work with to do the same. Working on my self-development



to *lead-by-example* provides me with more happiness and a deeper sense of meaning than drinking and partying ever did.

Following the DUI, I truly believed I was inherently a bad person. For years, dark thoughts and an all encompassing negative view of myself and life in general haunted me. In retrospect, it's clear that the majority of my self-criticism originated from receiving the DUI.

Now things have changed. With the effort I've made over the past few years

to improve myself to positively impact the world around me, I've slowly begun to view myself as a good person. Just like when I was a kid, I once again feel like I have value that I can bring to the world and am optimistic about that potential.

Return with the Elixir

Overcoming the fallout from the DUI has been a long and difficult journey—one that reshaped my identity and direction more than any other experience I've had. After fifteen years, I've finally reconciled with its impact on my life. Instead of being defined by my mistakes, I've emerged as a stronger, more resilient version of myself.

Trading in the hedonistic lifestyle of my adolescence for one centered around responsibility and self-development has imbued my life with a deeper sense of meaning and fulfillment. Today, I'm happier than I ever was in my late teens or early twenties. Each step forward on my self-development journey reinforces my confidence that I'm on the right path. While I occasionally wonder about the 'opportunity cost' of this direction,

I'm sure of one thing: I'm enjoying my life now more than ever, all while carrying far fewer regrets.

Fifteen years after the DUI, I feel as though I've reconnected with the person I was before it happened—while also becoming someone entirely new. The carefree “bro” I was in my teens and early twenties has become a part of this new resilient, disciplined version of myself. Surviving the darkest periods of my mid- to late-twenties made me stronger, while embracing self-development in my thirties helped me develop grit and gave me purpose.

Most important of all, I've rediscovered the optimism I had in myself as a kid. I know I'll continue to grow and change, but it feels like the DUI chapter of my life has finally come to a close. For the first time since I was a kid, I'm excited to see where my story takes me next.

