

Chasing the Dragon

By **Anthony L. White**

The chase begins with that first rush.

After shooting up, heroin users experience a sensation of euphoria and numbness that lasts a brief moment. Then, as if riding a pendulum, they experience alternating states of wakefulness and drowsiness. Their breathing and heart rate slow.

One of two possible outcomes follow.

The uncontrollable urge to recapture that first rush leads to a never-ending cycle of needing more and stronger heroin to attain the unreachable peak of that first high.

Or, breathing stops, the heart stops, resulting in overdose or death.

Robert Jordan, a counselor at the Extension, a drug addiction treatment center in Marietta, has devoted his life to helping men addicted to heroin find a path to recovery.

The 10-year Navy veteran chose this career because he understands the struggle.

He knows heroin intimately and realizes that one of the most devastating street drugs of the late 1960s and 1970s has resurfaced ... only today it's stronger, more deadly, and more accessible than ever.

And, he knows how the pursuit of that unattainable first rush or "chasing the dragon" can lead to addiction, overdoses and death. Because 10 years ago, he lived the life of a heroin addict.

A TALE OF ADDICTION AND RECOVERY

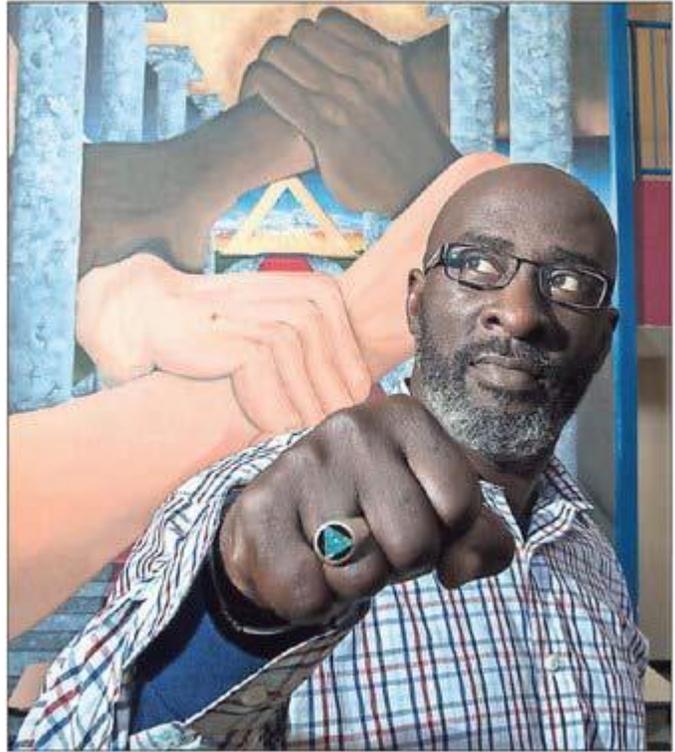
In 2004, Robert Jordan lost his wife of 12 years to cancer.

During the next two years, he also lost himself in a cycle of drug addiction that evolved from marijuana and alcohol to crack cocaine and then to heroin. Eventually, his drug habits led to "hardcore addiction and quickly brought me to a bottom that I never knew existed."

"I was using heroin to numb my pain, the same way a dentist uses Novocain to numb the pain of a toothache," Jordan said. "If the dentist doesn't fix the problem, as soon as the Novocain wears off,

the pain returns. That's what was happening with me. I was using heroin and other drugs to numb my emotional issues, pain and trauma. My problems didn't go anywhere, but my tolerance and progression with the drugs went through the roof."

Heroin wasn't considered an epidemic during the years Jordan was addicted to heroin and other drugs, but he said those years of drug abuse helped him to deal with today's heroin epidemic, evidenced by the 39 heroin overdose deaths in Cobb County during 2015.



Standing in the dining hall of The Extension, Robert Jordan, a certified Addiction Counselor and Program Director for the men's recovery program at The Extension, wears his 'Sobriety Circle & Triangle' ring as a remembrance of his own days of addiction. / Staff-Kelly J. Huff

The amount of heroin seized by law enforcement in Cobb County also highlights the extent of the heroin epidemic. According to the Marietta/ Cobb/Smyrna Narcotics Unit, in 2005, law enforcement seized 6.9 grams of heroin in the county. In 2010, 122.4 grams of heroin was seized. The amount of heroin seized skyrocketed from 187.4 grams in 2014 to 8,090.7 grams in 2015.

Jordan, now 54 years old, said his heroin addiction was especially hard because the more he used the drug, the more he needed it to avoid withdrawal symptoms.

"The best way to describe heroin's withdrawal sickness is it's like a flu," Jordan said. "There are cramps, there are sweats, there are muscle aches, there's diarrhea and a lot of other crazy things happening to the body. You're cold and you're hot. And all these things can happen in the course of 30 minutes and continue repeating until you put more heroin in your body, which makes the next withdrawal even worse.

“Crack is a stimulant that took my brain to this super speed, and the heroin was the equalizer that brought it back to a manageable state,” Jordan explained. “When I woke up in the morning, the first thing I needed to do was get a hit of heroin so I wouldn’t have the withdrawal sickness. After the withdrawal symptoms went away, I used cocaine and crack all day to keep me stimulated. When it was time to come down, I had to use heroin again.

“My entire life began to revolve around my addiction, because the more I used, the more I wanted and needed to get high,” Jordan said. “I became unemployable, homeless, and I lost the respect of my daughters. And then one night, while I was at a drug-infested hotel getting high, I received a call from my daughter, Naresh. She told me she was coming to pick me up the next morning and taking me to a treatment center she had found.” The next morning, just like she had said, Naresh Jordan picked her father up at the hotel and drove him to the Extension, a residential drug rehabilitation center for men in Marietta. That was in 2006. A year later, Jordan walked out of the Extension clean, sober and with a purpose.

“While a resident at the Extension, I found that my purpose in life is to work with men with similar struggles and to show them that there is hope,” Jordan said.

In 2008, after returning to school and becoming a certified addiction counselor, Jordan returned to the 47-bed men’s facility where his recovery began.

“Back then, I didn’t have the tools to deal with my addiction, which was getting worse,” he said. “When my daughter brought me here, she basically saved my life, so I owe her a lifetime of gratitude.”

Jordan said he doesn’t initially tell this part of his story to clients at the Extension, but when he does reveal his past struggles with addiction, the typical response is, “Wow, Mr. Jordan used to sleep in bed 11 and had the same struggles that I do and he made it through.”

BEHIND THE EPIDEMIC

In 2014, Robert Jordan lost 11 former residents and clients of The Extension.

“It was disheartening because 11 men I’d work with over the years lost their battle with heroin addiction,” Jordan said. “They were all between the ages of 24-30 years old, which is way too young to die.”

Jordan said he understood why this happened.

Tolerance is a major factor in drug addiction, and when the men entered the center, their tolerance for heroin was higher because of the repeated use, Jordan explained. However, during rehabilitation and recovery, their tolerance for the drug changed. When they left the center and started using heroin again, initially their body was less tolerant to the drug, which can lead to overdosing.

Jordan also saw this as a sign that not only had heroin resurfaced, but it had “come back stronger and more potent because it is being cut or mixed with other substances, like fentanyl, which is extremely deadly.”

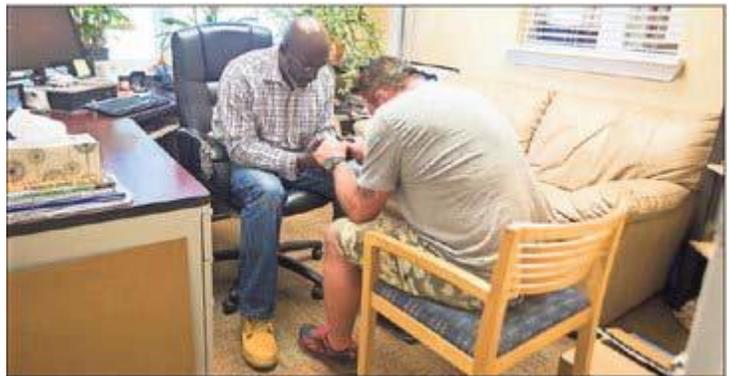
Although heroin use is typically accompanied by the use of other illicit drugs, Jordan believes that legal or prescription drugs is one of the primary reasons heroin has resurfaced.

Heroin, which appears as a white or brown powder, is an opioid drug synthesized from morphine, a naturally occurring substance extracted from the seed pod of the Asian opium poppy plant. The drug can also come in a black sticky version called black tar heroin.

Because heroin is an opioid, its resurfacing may be tied to the country's increasing dependence on opioid pain medications, like hydrocodone and oxycodone, Jordan said.

"These medications have been abused and many patients have become addicted to them," Jordan said. "I don't think the patients who were prescribed these narcotic painkillers were made aware of the dangers of how addictive they are. After they become addicted and can no longer get these medications through medical professionals, many turn to the less expensive, stronger and more available street heroin."

But that's only one side of the coin, he said.



Robert Jordan, program director for the men's recovery program at The Extension, ends a counseling session with Todd H., who is nearing the end of his yearlong stint in the program in Marietta, with prayer. The Extension is not a religious-based program, but any time a client asks for prayer, Jordan will acknowledge the request, saying, 'It is a God thing.' / Staff-Kelly J. Huff