

Running his hands through his mop of dirty blonde hair, senior Will Smithmier looked down. His eyes burned a hole in the soles of his shoes. It was always easier not to make eye contact.

“There’s a lot of things people can say I was addicted to,” Smithmier said. “The way I see it, I was addicted to feeling numb.”

He looked up to the ceiling.

“I had messed up to the point where I couldn’t look at myself in the mirror anymore.”

Opioid addiction had haunted Smithmier since his sophomore year. By the end of second semester, his Honda Civic doubled as his house, and his friends’ couches were a luxury. He had no source of income and nowhere to go. This void filled with drugs.

“It became a point where if I didn’t have it, I couldn’t live. I couldn’t be myself. I tricked my brain into thinking that being drugged down was being myself.”

His hand clenched into a fist, and his eyebrows furrowed as he remembered who was to blame for digging the hole of addiction.

“I was never a victim of peer pressure in the normal sense. I, unofficially, was always peer pressured by a shadow of myself. I always had the self control to say no, but I didn’t want to.”

It wasn’t until June 6, 2016, that his life would turn around.

“I got arrested by private sheriffs my mom had hired. I had nothing on me. I was in my boxers. They woke me up and dragged me out. They had me shackled.”

His laser blue eyes shot up. He thought he was being arrested for vandalism, but when he reached Hallsville, Texas, 13 hours later, he knew it was more than a night in juvy.

“They carried me into the main building, and they sat me down at a conference table. At this point I’m speechless. I’m very angry, and I’m coming down off a lot of drugs so that fueled it all. That was my first official day at HeartLight. I go on to spend 15 months of my life there.”

Smithmier thought lying his way through therapy at HeartLight Ministries, a therapeutic boarding school, would get him home faster. He held out for three months by insisting he didn’t have a problem to fix. But that couldn’t last.

“One day I just broke down. I knew I had a problem. I told them I was fine, but out of nowhere I realized I couldn’t take it anymore.”

Smithmier knew keeping to himself wasn’t an option. He began listening in meetings and talking to his therapist.

“It eats you up inside, you know, to say you’re fine when you’re not.”

At Heartlight, every day posed a new emotional hurdle. It took weekly psych tests, counseling at least twice a week and drug-therapy meetings to make Smithmier feel like he was starting to recover. But being separated from drugs wasn’t enough.

“They said I wasn’t facing the real reason for my drug abuse. It doesn’t work until they root out the deep problems.”

Smithmier brushed the hair from his face as he continued.

“The reason for my addiction was that I had a very f\*\*\*\*d up situation growing up. That’s no excuse for doing drugs, but it’s an explanation. The reason I was there so long was because it was so hard for me to accept it.”

Once Smithmier realized the unstable relationship he had with his parents was the root of his drug problem, he found it easier to overcome.

“Getting sent there wasn’t my choice, but I guess it was to learn. HeartLight gives you the tools to find the things you need but I could’ve just acted and not actually done the work. I did it because I always wanted to see myself as not a screw up.

“Your true self is expressed by what you do for people, your compassion, your love for people. That’s what Heartlight really taught me. When I left, they were like ‘you’re ready for the new world,’ but it wasn’t a new world. It was the same world. I’m trying to be myself in a place I don’t think I can.”

Smithmier knew recovery wouldn’t come easily.

“People that say they recover in months, no. Recovery takes years. I’m still recovering. I still have to go to a therapist, a drug counselor. Recovery has a lot of different stages and I’m going through the stage where I came back thinking I was recovered but recovery is never over. You can never reach perfection. I try my hardest.”

Smithmier still fought his old habits and stressors. Skipping school, avoiding his feelings and relapses caused setbacks, but remembering how important his well-being was to those close to him helped him get back on track.

“Knowing that I’m loved and loving back is a big factor for me right now. It’s really keeping me going.

“I have a lot of different ways to cope with my stress now, like drawing, meditation, just being active even helps. As much as I used to bag on physical activity, it actually helps a lot.”

He leaned back and sighed.

“I would say the biggest part of the recovery wasn’t the recovery. It was finding out who I really was and what makes me happy.”

Smithmier sat up.

“There were also a lot of reasons why I was given that second chance. I’m back here now. Whether it’s the will of something all powerful or something else, because stuff happens. I just always hope the next day is a lot better.”

He brushed the hair from his eyes one last time.

“I’m trying my hardest to keep myself together.”