

# Joshua Cagney

## Living One Day at a Time

Joshua Cagney's sobriety date is November 16, 2003. It's the day he was arrested on charges of involuntary manslaughter for a drunk driving accident that occurred on November 9<sup>th</sup>.

Josh's alcoholism had been progressing for some time, but he remembers November 9<sup>th</sup> as a calm Sunday like any other. In the morning, he and his roommate went outside and raked leaves while taking in the gorgeous fall weather. All morning he remained sober, something that was becoming more and more of a rarity. Then a football game started up, and Josh had a few beers. At halftime, he decided to drive to a nearby restaurant and get some food.

While returning home, he failed to notice a red light and slammed into another car. A couple vacationing from Peru were in the backseat; both were thrown from the vehicle, and the man was killed instantly.

Josh was taken to the hospital where he registered a Blood Alcohol Concentration of .15—low for him at the time, but twice the legal limit. His father came by to visit but was unable to stay. Seeing the police question his son about his intoxication was gut wrenching. In a daze and in shock, Josh finally drifted off to sleep. When he awoke, he felt confused; he wasn't handcuffed to the bed. The police were nowhere to be seen. "It must've been a bad dream," he thought. "I'm sure everyone is okay." He checked out of the hospital and went home.

Back home, his longtime friend and roommate, Joey, was worried sick. "Where have you been? Where's your car?" were the questions Joey asked. Still in shock and now in deep denial, Josh answered vaguely that he'd been in some kind of accident. Then the police called, informing him that the man in the car had died, and that the only reason they hadn't charged him yet, was that they didn't know whether to charge him with one

or two counts of involuntarily manslaughter; it was unclear whether the man's wife would survive her injuries.

"That was it. I got hammered. I really don't remember anything that happened from that moment, until the time I was arrested," says Josh. "That was a struggle for me for a long time. How could I possibly drink again knowing what I had done the night before? Knowing that alcohol had created that horror? It took me a couple of years in recovery to recognize that I had no coping mechanisms. I had no way to manage problems in my life that didn't involve alcohol. I couldn't handle having killed someone, so I numbed it the only way I knew how to handle it."

The following Sunday, the date of his arrest, Josh embarked on his journey of sobriety and recovery as he simultaneously entered the prison system, where he would remain for over seven years.

Today, after 16 years of sobriety, Josh is the Co-founder and

Chief Operating Officer (COO) of New Paradigm Recovery (NPR), an intensive outpatient program in Tyson's Corner. His life is devoted to trying to reach people badly in need of treatment for their alcohol use and drug use disorders. "Clients come in for between 9-15 hours of clinical care a week," explains Josh. "It's meant to be a transitional program for someone who's coming out of residential treatment, or someone whose issues are a little more significant than can be handled in normal outpatient counseling. But we want to work in such a way that it doesn't hinder their life, we want people to continue to work, we want people to stay at home; we want to "invite the crisis," so we can learn how to manage and cope with issues in the home or the workplace as they come up. We work with clients to develop the coping mechanisms necessary to address those issues." New Paradigm tries to graduate clients



out of the program on a three to six-month timeline depending on the individual's progress. Intensive outpatient is a crucial time in recovery since clients are often being reintroduced to their daily life and to the same surroundings where they struggled with their addiction.

NPR, founded along with three other friends in recovery, focuses on counseling not only the patient, but the patient's family and friends; the organization offers family therapy as well as multi-family group therapy where different families come together to discuss their experiences and issues in an environment free of shame and full of solidarity. "Unfortunately alcoholism and drug addiction tend to breed a great degree of secrecy and shame," notes Josh. "And that breeds unbelievable depression. So once a family is sitting with three to five other families and are able to see that they are not the only one affected by this they're able to say 'Well, maybe we deserve compassion, too,' They realize there are other families dealing with this sense of shame who are deserving of compassion."

Joshua isn't a big proponent of basic, one-on-one therapy as a pathway to recovery. He believes alternative modalities like equine therapy, eye movement desensitization, and neurofeedback therapy are important components of confronting and learning to process trauma. "We use different tools to approach the underlying problems," he explains, "because I have never seen a case where someone is simply an addict or an alcoholic. There is always an underlying issue or disorder that feeds the alcoholism or addiction, whether it be a traumatic event or a diagnosable disorder. There's always something that needs to be addressed, and if we make the mistake of just saying, let's fix the drinking problem without addressing what's fueling that, then as soon as that person's out of therapy, it is highly they're going to go do the same thing all over again. We pride ourselves on being a mental health facility, rather than a drug and alcohol treatment facility."

Generally, the program takes on a client load of up to 15 people; more than that would overload their capacity to provide highly individualized care. There may be expansion via opening up a second facility in the future. Currently, NPR's staff includes 3 therapists, a clinical director, a staff clinician, and a leadership team of 3 of the 4 founders. One of those founders is Joshua's old friend and roommate, Joey.

Josh has long been familiar with the behaviors of addiction, and with the toll they can take. His mother was an alcoholic, and she passed away five years ago after decades of struggle with her addiction. At one point after his release from prison, Josh organized an intervention for her. "I took a clinical approach to it," reflects Josh. "I brought the family and friends in, and we all agreed on boundaries. If she goes into treatment, we're here to support her, if not, we go our separate ways. She elected not to go into treatment."

One by one, though, the family broke down and began talking to her and helping her out again. Josh was the last holdout, until finally, he got a call from his uncle that she was in the hospital. "She was in the ER, and they were admitting her to the ICU," remembers Josh. "I made a conscious decision to go back into my mother's life, but with no clinical expectations. To be nothing but a loving son that was just going to care for her. And that was incredibly empowering. We did that for the next year and a half before she passed. I would do absolutely anything for her, except go to the liquor store."

Despite her struggles, Josh remembers his mother as a fascinating, brilliant woman and a fantastic mom. She came out of the 60s counterculture and, in college, could be found in the mountains of West Virginia shooting rifles and preparing for the revolution she was sure was coming. "There was a rebellious piece to her," nods Josh. "She taught me it's important to question everything and not to accept things at face value: I got my critical thinking from her. She was a bit of a renaissance woman. She loved to travel, loved to read, loved to learn, and went to school on and off her whole life. I remember her taking me to the opera when I was five or six and struggling to stay awake! She tried to expose me to a lot as I grew up, and that means a lot to me today even if I didn't appreciate it then."

Josh's father was born to an NYPD cop in the Bronx and raised in a violent, alcoholic home. He went on to work with abused and neglected boys throughout his career. "My father endowed me with a commitment of service to others," Josh says as he draws a parallel between his father's work confronting his past traumas, and his own work doing the same. "He helped me understand how to find meaning in the things that are meaningless, and that becomes restorative,

rehabilitative.”

Their marriage was an unusual one. Josh’s mother had first dated his father’s brother before meeting his father when he was home on leave from the Navy. The two were an odd match; the counter-culture, dyed-in-the-wool liberal and the conservative military man. “How they ended up together is absolutely beyond me,” smiles Josh. “They couldn’t be more different. I remember hearing the most brutal argument of my life, when my mom found out my dad voted for Reagan. She blew a gasket!”

The two married and settled in the DC area; soon after, Josh was born in Arlington. By the time he was two years old, the little family packed for Chicago where Josh’s father had gotten a job working for a criminal justice ministry. When Josh was six, his sister was born. Josh loved the suburbs of Chicago where he played with the neighborhood kids and rode bikes all day until the setting sun meant it was time to head for home. Most of all, he loved the Chicago Cubs. When he was eight, his parents separated, and his father moved further downtown into Evanston. He loved to take the L to Wrigley Field, where for \$10 you could get a bleacher seat, a hot dog, and a coke. He liked school, and worked hard academically. But baseball was it for him; he played Little League and followed the team obsessively.

When Josh was 13, his mother moved his sister and him back to the DC area. The transition was rough; he missed his friends, his dad, the Cubs, and Chicago, Wrigley Field. He began to feel despondent and disconnected from the other kids. By 14, he had had his first drink, and already he saw the appeal. “The beauty of that moment was that I stopped caring what other people thought about me,” recalls Josh. “By the time I was in high school, the only people I could really connect with were the people who felt the same way—the people who felt disconnected and felt like they didn’t fit in.”

Still, Josh was never inclined to skip class like many of his friends. He was playing on the football team, and he knew he needed to keep his grades up to participate. Thus, he showed up and did enough to get by academically even though his heart was never really in the work. Meanwhile, his drinking progressed steadily; he transitioned from drinking at parties to drinking alone. His father moved into the area to be closer to the family, but Josh resented the move; it meant he could no

longer return to his beloved Chicago in the summers to see his friends and the Cubs. Happily though, the relationship between his parents improved greatly. After their divorce, they let go of any resentments and worked together to parent. Until his mother died, they shared a close friendship.

Outside of the classroom, Josh always held part-time jobs. He worked at a fast food restaurant as a freshman and sophomore. He later found a job with a telemarketing firm. He quickly displayed a knack for the job and would earn \$20 or \$30 out of almost every call he made. By his junior year he was managing the office. “In retrospect, it was not good,” reflects Josh. “It really fueled my ego, which was not healthy. The tragedy of it was that I could do it drunk; I was almost better at it with three or four beers in my system.”

During the second half of his junior year, Josh decided to get sober and focus on his studies. His grades shot up, and he was accepted into a couple of good colleges like George Mason University. He ultimately decided he wasn’t ready for a more intense academic environment. Instead, he joined the military on a six-year enlistment. However, the Cold War ended and the military started downsizing and President Clinton began to offer bonuses to anyone who wanted to end their enlistment early. After 3 years, Josh took the bonus, left the army, and started taking classes at Northern Virginia Community College before transferring to Virginia Tech.

He began working several part-time jobs, and between the jobs and his work, he didn’t have much time for drinking; it was a relatively stable interlude. After a year of studying, Josh came back to Northern Virginia and got a job as an IT technician and began to develop a career in the field. “This was the infancy of the IT boom,” recalls Josh. “It was a time when IT was in such great demand that you really didn’t have to be terribly effective. If you showed up, your job was pretty secure, and you were going to be paid well. In Tyson’s Corner, you couldn’t throw a rock without someone offering you \$60,000 to \$70,000 annual salary just to show up.”

For eight years, Josh remained in the IT world, at first working for a few small software companies, then consulting through Accenture. “It was a disgusting amount of money for a 27 year-old,” says Josh. “And that introduced me to the world of consulting and contracting which was

catastrophic for a young alcoholic." All of a sudden, Josh had the time and money to drink as much as he wanted. Over time, he began to drink first thing in morning and usually worked with a buzz on. He would even leave bottles at the homes of his friends. "Alcoholism is chronic, it is progressive, and it is fatal," asserts Josh. "By the time I was 30 years old, I was pre-cirrhotic, I was pre-diabetic, I weighed about 330 pounds, and I was in bad shape. The tragedy of it was I had absolutely no idea that things had become as unmanageable as they were."

Josh dismissed any friends who broached his drinking with him. He was certain his drinking was his business; that it was only affecting him anyway. Then the accident happened, and he was confronted with reality. "The first realization I remember having was that it was my actions and my self-centered thinking that put me in a position where I caused a loss of life," recalls Josh. "And since that was true, I needed to give serious thought to my thinking, to my attitude, and to my beliefs about my place in the world and how I affected the people around me. My attitude had always been, if you don't like my drinking, you're welcome to leave at any time, but if it's a problem, it's only a problem that affects me. Suddenly, I had to look at the fact that my problems affect the people around me, even people I would never otherwise meet."

Josh quickly pled guilty; he did not want to put the family of the victim through any further trauma. In June of 2004, he went in for sentencing. The judge had a sentencing guideline for his case, 2-6 years, with a midpoint of four, and Josh expected to be sentenced to four years in prison. He got eight. But even this, though something of a shock, felt like a relief, too. "I had absolutely no argument with it," Josh says. "I was so hungry for reconciliation. For someone to give me something or say, 'If you do this, it will somehow make this better.' That was a fool's errand, but I readily accepted it at the time."

He was sent to Mecklenburg State Prison, a maximum-security environment that housed death row. It was a dangerous prison. And to make matters worse, Josh's out-of-place commitment to sobriety quickly got him labeled as an undercover cop and a target of violence. The one bright spot was the commitment the prison warden, himself in recovery, had to AA. Instead of the typical one meeting a week, his prison offered

three, which he personally led. "The meetings were good, they were very engaging," nods Josh. "Those were some of the best meetings I've ever been to, bar none."

Also while at Mecklenburg, Josh became a trustee on death row, someone who brought the inmates things that they needed like supplies and food. "These guys were locked in their cells 23 hours a day," explains Josh. "It was humbling and educational, and I did that job with a lot of gratitude."

After about six months, Josh was transferred to a lower-security institution called Haynesville. Prisons do an annual review to adjust inmates' security level, and Josh was moved because of a classification change arising from that review. Haynesville was on Virginia's Northern Neck—an area Josh liked for its beauty and the smell of sea salt in the air. He spent about half of his sentence in Haynesville, where he met great counselors and got involved in as many programs as he could relating to substance abuse, treatment and education. He worked as a librarian, and after some time even began teaching classes as well. He quit smoking and became a runner, using it as an outlet and running 60 miles week.

He also began pursuing his undergraduate degree, taking correspondence courses from Ohio University (OU) and choosing a major of Economics and Business Law. At the time, he thought maybe he'd like to pursue business or financial planning. He also chose it simply because OU offered a broad range of economics courses by correspondence and because he enjoyed economics.

He ran into trouble when some of his higher-level economic courses required calculus and calculus wasn't offered as a correspondence course. Fortunately, he met a former high school math teacher in the prison who became his tutor. "We got an old calc textbook and went through it from beginning to end. I couldn't have done it without him," nods Josh. "It was helpful to me to understand the nature of reliance on other people. Being dependent, actively asking for help, and seeking the engagement of others to be able to accomplish a goal was a helpful lesson, particularly in that environment." He completed his work for his Associate's Degree in 2007. "It's framed and put up with my other degrees," says Josh, "not because a two-year-degree is so impressive, but because it means a lot to me that I

was able to achieve that in an environment that really did not foster advancement. That's the most important degree I have."

In 2008, he was transferred to a small facility called Botetourt which was intended to be a therapeutic community. It was an old-school work camp, "straight out of *Cool Hand Luke*," as Josh describes it, and the environment was anything but healing. "I discovered that the concept of compulsory treatment was a complete and total joke," remembers Josh. "You cannot force people to treat a problem they don't want to acknowledge. It's a waste of time, it just breeds resentment and alienation."

Josh was one of the few on the site who was actually committed to sobriety. Most of the inmates treated it as a joke, and he began to resent the environment and asked to be transferred. Instead, a counselor made a deal with him. He was told to focus on his schoolwork and focus on the other activities that were important to him. If he did that, he wouldn't have to go to the group sessions anymore. So, Josh doubled down on his commitment to the library, and invested himself heavily in what was called the "dog team" — a local program that brought in dogs to be trained by selected inmates. After being approved for the program, he was never without a dog, which deeply comforted him.

Later in 2008, it was announced that Botetourt would close, and Josh was allowed to help close the prison down. The Captain there had become a good friend. She came from a supermax facility and started out quite harsh but over time she came to trust Josh. She supported his classwork, making a point of bringing him his diploma when it arrived and talking about what it meant to him before sending it to his home. Part of closing the prison down meant being outside the fences of the prison. She asked him, "Will you run on me if I let you go out there?" "I said nope, and she said that was good enough for her," recalls Josh. "I have this vivid memory of walking out for the first time and seeing a tree outside of the prison. I walked over, touched the bark of this old oak tree, and cried. I was amazed at how something so simple could be so profound and beautiful."

The last year and a half of Josh's incarceration was spent in a regional jail at Staunton. This turned out to be somewhat fortunate because there were many inmates there

from Loudon County, where Josh would soon be released. He was able to make connections with many men in early sobriety. One young man there put Josh in touch with his sponsor, Dave, who lived in Great Falls. Dave ended up providing the seed money for NPR and became one of the four partners that launched the business.

In short order, Josh completed the work for his undergraduate degree, and then was released from prison on December 1, 2010.

Josh didn't know what he wanted to do next, but he took a job cleaning floors at a warehouse. Barely a month into working there, someone at the warehouse had a problem with their computer. With his IT background, Josh quickly helped fix the problem. That afternoon, he got a call from the President of the IT Company contracted to the warehouse. "He said, 'I understand you've been touching my employees' computers.' He was a gruff guy, and I thought I was in trouble," laughs Josh. "But then he said to me, 'Do you want a job?' And suddenly I was in computers again."

Josh was grateful for the job, but still struggled to readjust, suffering from a form of PTSD common among former inmates. His sponsor, Chris, was an Iraq War veteran, and the two bonded over their shared trauma. They would laugh about how they'd unconsciously argue over who got to sit with the back to the wall, the better to keep an eye out for potential attackers.

He also got back in touch with old friends, including Joey. Before Josh's incarceration, Joey had never been much of a drinker; now, it seemed the tables had turned. Josh invited him out to talk in order to apologize and make amends with his old friend and noticed that he put away four or five beers. Not long after, Joey called him asking him for advice about his drinking; Josh recommended AA, but Joey said it really wasn't all that bad. Another year passed before Joey reached out, this time confessing that he'd picked up a drug habit. Now, Josh recommended residential treatment, but again, Joey felt it just wasn't that bad. Finally, another year later, Joey had hit his rock bottom and was ready to do whatever Josh asked.

"The man who was killed in the wreck had a daughter," says Josh. "She was 13 at the time. And part of my struggle then, that continues to this day, is the fact that there's a young woman out there who doesn't have a dad because of what I've

done. Joey had a 7-year old daughter, and I genuinely love and care about Joey. So getting Joey sober was an opportunity to give a little girl her dad back. I believe that was God giving me an opportunity to find some degree of absolution.”

Meanwhile, Josh had entered grad school. He knew he didn't want to stay in IT but wanted to do more meaningful work. He got a degree in psychology, hoping to become a licensed therapist doing clinical work. His first clinical assignment was working with juveniles, something that made him nervous. He wasn't sure he'd be able to relate to the kids, but he quickly found he loved working with them. Four thousand hours of clinical work was a necessary part of licensing but six months into the work, the Commonwealth of Virginia told him that, as a registered felon, it was not legal for him to work as a clinician in a mental health or substance abuse treatment facility. His supervisor wanted him to continue anyway, but Josh resigned; he knew it was the only way to insulate the organization from potential legal consequences.

Josh was heartbroken and unsure of what to do next. He had taken a part-time job with a non-profit in Fairfax working in a correctional environment in Loudon County. There, he was allowed to provide clinical care to prisoners. But he wanted to do more. In 2017, his partners approached him about the idea of opening a sober living facility, but Josh wasn't interested. A few months later, they had a new proposal—an intensive outpatient treatment program. Again, he said no, but now he hesitated. He had just gone on a transformative pilgrimage—the Camino de Santiago—across Spain where he reflected about his past and future. Ultimately, he decided it was fear holding him back from launching the facility, and he returned ready to launch NPR.

Despite Josh's love of clinical work, he knows he can make the most impact by being the best leader possible. As such, he has enrolled in a PhD program in Organizational Leadership where he plans to make the biggest impact he can

possibly make. That impact may very well give back a mother or a father to some little boy or girl.

As a leader, Josh pushes people to question what they believe to be true. Like his mother, to never accept things they see or hear at face value. “Start asking yourself ‘Why,’” encourages Josh. “My experience is that if you want to make God laugh, make a plan. Tomorrow is promised to nobody. My leadership style is to try to empower people to live in the moment. Don't lose what you have right now.” Similarly, he advises young people not to go through the motions or pick a career because it's what their parents did.

Still, he does plan for the future in a generalized way—he plans to be happy. “I know what I want in 10-20 years,” smiles Josh, “but philosophically, more than practically. I don't know what I'll be doing professionally, but I want to be happy, I want to be engaged, I want to be trusting, I want to be compassionate. I'm a fervent believer that God's will for each of us is to be happy, joyous and free. That's all. Anything that detracts from me accomplishing that in my life, I don't want any part in that.”

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