

PAT MEDELEZ

My name is Pat Medelez. I was born and raised in this area – Hawaiian Gardens.

‘That’s how they raised us.’

My dad voluntarily signed up [for the Army]. He didn't want to be taken back to the orphanage where he was being raised with his four siblings. One of his uncles helped him sign his enlistment papers because he was too young. His mother was never in the picture. His father was more interested in running a bar and having that lifestyle with different women. He didn't have time to raise his kids. There was five of them, but four of them were in this orphanage. My dad was the second to the oldest. He was the one making sure that they were taken care of. He made a promise to himself that he would come back for his brothers.

He went in, enlisted, and signed up for two tours because his pay rate changed. You get combat pay if you go to the front. He stacked up his chips because he wanted to be able to get [his brothers] out of that place. It didn't work out that way. His dad found out about this money that he had been putting away for those four years and he took it. My grandfather was struggling himself and got into some trouble with people and they tried murdering him. They unloaded a revolver. They shot him five times and stabbed him seven times. They hammered his skull with a ball-peen hammer. He wound up being crippled from the waist down. He was the type of guy who had a lot of aggression and a bad temper and treated us mean.

[My dad] managed to purchase a house [in Hawaiian Gardens] back in the late '60s using his GI Bill. When my father was discharged from the military, he had my mother get everything together and they brought my six older siblings that were born in San Antonio over here. We had already a big foundation of family established here. My parents raised us really close, always made sure that we were taken care of and taking care of each other. I have three older sisters; they were basically raising me at the same time. My mother worked at a dry cleaner's. My dad worked for a carpet company in Anaheim. Minimal pay for both of them, but they managed to have food on the table every day.

We had one of my aunts or uncles or one of my parents' cousins living with us at all times. That's how my parents worked. They never asked anything from them. Years later, my grandfather moved to California after my dad and his siblings were established. They took care of him. My grandfather lived with us. He would purposely run over our legs or fingers with his wheelchair. That's how my parents raised us. Showing us how compassionate my dad was toward his dad who neglected him his entire life.

'The gang and the violence were already here.'

In that era, the gang and the violence were already here. My brothers grew up into it, following along and doing what everybody else is doing at that time. The students they went to school with were trying out new things, experimenting with alcohol and whatever drugs were [available] back then. My older brothers were never violent. They drank and they had a garage band.

I was a straight-A student, getting these certificates of achievement in the first, second, third, and fourth grades. I had a bunch of them. I was always a good student. But if there was a point where somebody really pissed me off, it would turn to violence. It would escalate right away. I have a short fuse, a temper that nobody else in my family has. A couple of my brothers witnessed some of the fights. I was a lot younger, but I was always getting into fights with older kids. My dad showed us. This is the training that all of us went through. He had this little makeshift boxing ring in the backyard. He worked at a carpet company so he would have the padding and then he would set it up all the way around with the poles and rope. We'd go in there and he would tell us how to fight.

Hanging around gangs a lot is one thing. But if you want to get involved, then you have to go through an initiation. There'll be three other members and somebody keeping time and you get jumped in. I was 13. I was excited to do it. Once you're initiated, you're in no matter what. From that point, you have to get involved; you can't just be a hang around. If they're going to take action against another city, another neighborhood or different gang, you have to be a part of it or else face the consequences. Now that I look back, it was something that I probably could have avoided, that I should have avoided. At the time, it was important for me to be part of.

I've been involved in violence. I witnessed it. I've seen it. I've been next to it. I've been on the side of somebody getting shot. I've been stabbed three times in fights and shot at maybe a half dozen times. I've never been shot. Got beat up by the police officers several times, gang fights, and had my head split open a couple of times. It's all because of the lifestyle that goes along with being involved in the neighborhood gang.

'I was a full-blown addict.'

What took over most of my daily activity was doing drugs. That's what became number one for me for many, many years. By the time I got to high school, I was a full-blown addict and alcoholic. I loved to drink every day. I used drugs every day. That's what it was like. No more school. No more high school football. No more baseball. I loved sports. I was good at football. The years that I did play, we were league champs. But I already had a taste of that other lifestyle. Once you get involved with drugs for so long, it

becomes about just doing that. Not so much about representing or hanging out with the other homies that are gang members. I tried dealing, but I'm not a good salesperson. I liked [the drugs] too much. I thought I was going to be like this for the rest of my life. But when you choose this lifestyle, you can see what happens – either someone tells on you, or you get really sloppy at what you're doing, and you get caught. Eventually, everyone gets caught.

I've been incarcerated, maybe two dozen times before 18. Most [of my lockups] over 18 are drug related. When you're in jail, it's like being out here. Half the people I grew up with were already there before me. At 21, I went to prison. Once I was released, I lived with my oldest brother in Orange County. Maybe not even a year after I got out, I met somebody. She was more or less a normie, a person that really don't party or do drugs. Once we were involved, I explained to her there was something that I like to do, my drug of choice. She had never known anybody that did what I did, but she really wanted to be with me. She accepted it. From that point, it's our entire relationship – 17 years. There was good at the beginning and then at the end, it was really, really bad. My son, his entire life, that's all he knew. I was there every day raising him, but he grew up knowing what I was doing. I wasn't abusive, but everything that I did had to surround what I liked to do. Get the money, go get the drugs, come back – if I would come back – and then do it to get me through the day.

I ran out of veins.'

I ran out of veins because I'm an IV drug user. I had already used every part of my hands and fingers and arms, my chest, and my stomach. There were no more areas for me where I could put the needle in. I wasn't getting high. I wasn't getting loaded. The party was over. In desperation, I went to the methadone clinic and signed up for the maintenance program. This takes the place of using heroin. I signed up. I get on that. Well, once I seen how powerful it was, how good it was, how similar or identical it is to heroin, that became number one.

It's a treatment. It's legal. It helps take you off of what's illegal, but it also helps you not have withdrawals. If you let it work, it will work. But if your intentions are not to really clean up and stop using, you're just making your addiction a lot worse. That's what I did. I stayed on that program for 10 straight years. They have to start you off, I believe, at 40 milligrams per day. But if you continue to use the clinic, your counselor can raise you up. By the time I was already on it for a year, I was over 120 milligrams every day.

If you give a clean [drug] test, they allow you to take home methadone for up to a week or two. You have to come in with a metal lockbox. You take your dose there for that day at the clinic and then they will hand me six bottles of 120 milligrams each. They lock it, hand it to me and I wouldn't have to return back

for a week. My little hustle was trading that or selling that. I'd pour half out to another empty bottle. I would hustle them to make money or trade it for heroin. Ever since day one that I got on that program, I still shot dope all along. For me, they go hand in hand.

One day, I got sick. My feet and legs at the time were completely infected, both sides of my legs. I was dropped off at a hospital. The infection had already settled into my bloodstream. I was at a 105, 106-degree temperature. I didn't know if I was coming or going. I said, "I have to leave because I'm dosing methadone. I'm going to be really sick." I remember the doctor telling me, "Mr. Medelez, if you leave, we don't think you'll be alive by tomorrow morning."

The next morning they phoned the methadone clinic to get proof of my dosing chart. There was proof, so the doctor went ahead and prescribed me 120 milligrams of methadone in tablet form. They gave me 12 10-milligram tablets to keep me from withdrawing and pulling out IVs and leaving. It allowed me to stay long enough to get rid of the infection. A good part of the day was tending to all the abscesses I had. At one time I would have maybe up to 22 or 24 open holes to the bone, the rotten flesh on my body, on my legs, on my arms. It hurt. [After the hospital,] I went to a place where I knew they would be able to medically detox me, a long-term facility. All these other places, they do 28 days, or they do a seven-day detox and then the rehab. I knew there's no way that I'll ever be able to detox in seven days. I'm going to be sick for months and months. That's how it happened for a six-month detox.

'The first step is always the hardest one.'

Six months after I went in, I had more clarity. I wasn't completely fully detoxed from the methadone, that stuff stays in you for years. For many years, I didn't want to use but my body needed it. I had to. I didn't know how to stop. I learned that it gets into our bones, our bone marrow, and it stays there, and it lingers, for years sometimes. For me, it was almost a couple of years by the time the obsession was not there. On May 15, I celebrated 17 years sober. Coming to the meetings of Narcotics Anonymous showed me something that I didn't even think about, or I overlooked. These guys are telling me that they had already been clean from everything for many, many years and they live like me in their neighborhoods in South Central or East LA or Long Beach where they have the same type of fight. They're telling me how they did this.

One addict helping another addict is therapeutic. What I've learned in the 17 years, anybody that has one week clean and sober can help another person that has one day. "How did you get five days clean?" "I'll tell you." I know that if I can get clean and stay clean, anybody else can do it. The first step is always the hardest one. Then the second step, you keep going to try something different to improve your life. Who doesn't want to do that?

I finally get it.'

I never really paid my debt to society for all the things that I've done, that I got away with. But in some way, this program did something. It flipped the switch. I don't know how or what it was. But something turned on to where it showed me something different that I wasn't used to. For a lot of years, not only was I harming myself, but I was raised close with my sisters and my brothers. My other brothers, they had already cleaned up their lives. They did their time, went to prison, come out. They're productive members of society, working, start a family, buy a home, grandkids. Here I am coming way from the back at a slow pace, and I finally get it.

My son is 32. My son is not good. He's basically like me, wound up using drugs and getting involved, not with a gang, but with people who use drugs and wind up going to prison for a long time. When I finally cleaned up and went to treatment for the first and the only time in my life, he spiraled. He didn't graduate. He went to juvenile hall. Everybody's got a different bottom. Everybody has a different story. But know that there's light at the end of the tunnel. You have to want it, not because somebody told you that you should or you're going to do it for somebody. You have to want to stop.

I like where I'm at. I mean, it took this long, pretty much 60 years. It took me to that path where I finally understand the true meaning of life, how to be loving, how to be caring. Because I wasn't. Now today, when I can help somebody that's coming into our program, that's where it all begins for me. That's going to allow us to do things beyond our wildest dreams. So far, it hasn't let me down.

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