



If You Try it Once

By Brenna Keleigh Heupel

DRUGS and alcohol have always been a deeply rooted fear of mine. As one grows up, he or she always hears the saying, "If you try it once, you're hooked forever," and that concept has terrified me since I was a child. I've seen the truth to that quote in my uncle, who made only a few mistakes in the beginning of his life, but those mistakes caused the world to crumble around him.

Throughout my childhood, I would sometimes hear whispers of my uncle with the context of my grandmother crying or my grandfather scowling. He was in jail, or he was living under a bridge, or he almost died. He was a constant source of grief for my grandparents that I knew existed, but it was not until I was six years old, before my great-grandmother's funeral, that I met him.

To a child, my uncle was a creature of nightmares. He was plastered in tattoos from head to toe, had dark, wild hair down to the middle of his back, was

covered in scars, and smelled strongly of stale cigarettes and beer. His voice boomed through the house whenever he spoke, but it was at its loudest at night when he would resign to his room and drink himself to sleep. After the alcohol stole his inhibitions, he would scream, cry, and throw things until he finally passed out from exhaustion.

Years later, after he returned to North Dakota to live with my grandparents, he and I became rather close. I learned to look past the outer appearance of a person and give their heart a chance to shine through, and in my uncle, I saw a good hearted man with a terrible past. One day, when I went to visit my grandparents' house, he told me about his life. When he was only eight years old, he was coerced into smoking with a group of older students at his school, and after that day, his life became a senseless spiral of alcoholism, homelessness, gang affiliation, jail, and death.

His wife died of a drug overdose. She was alone with him, and he had also been doing drugs, so he was not coherent enough to help her. Riddled with guilt, he desperately tried to leave the gang and the drugs behind him in Texas. North Dakota, at home again with his mother and father, was his final attempt at escape.

He did well for about a year. He worked two jobs, and I would come visit him at my grandparents' house whenever I could. Finally, when we thought he was back on his feet for good, he moved out to his own apartment. Everything was looking up; however, it did not last forever.

As is often the case for drug addicts, everything he had worked so hard to escape came crashing down on him. He lost his house and both of his jobs, and in the blink of an eye he was gone again. I lost my friend, and now we have no way of knowing whether he is alive or dead.

I often think about what my family and I could have done differently. Maybe we should not have let him move out on his own; maybe we should visited him more. Too many thoughts and hypotheticals to count rack my family's minds every day, but no matter what we would have done, he would have eventually been sucked back into the world drugs created for him. We let him know that he was loved and that there was a place he could go if he ever felt scared or alone, but in the end, drugs and alcohol were the only friends and family that he thought he needed. There was nothing we could have done to change that.

Once one enters the twisted world of drugs and alcohol, there is no ticket out. Any attempt at escape is futile, and will often result in the physical or emotional demise of loved ones. The only way to get out is to never go in because, "If you try it once, you're hooked forever." 🚫

ALERT SCHOLARSHIP

Brenna Heupel is a recent high school graduate from North Dakota. *Alert Magazine* congratulates her for winning the Alert Scholarship and we encourage her in the pursuit of her academic goals. We would also like to encourage future seniors to participate in our scholarship program.