Hoosier Strong

Indianapolis native Matt Heskett beat both opioid addiction and hep C. Now he's paying his good fortune forward with activism and education.

March 4, 2019 By Tim Murphy

Life is good today for Matt Heskett, 32, of Indianapolis. He's finally sober. He's rebuilding his credit and working toward buying a house. He's playing guitar and recently ran his first half-marathon, raising $1,200 for Fairbanks, the drug and alcohol addiction treatment center where he now works helping others find their way out of addiction. "I get to see that light come back into people's eyes as they turn their lives around," he says.

On top of all that, in 2017, he was cured of hepatitis C virus (HCV). But according to the laid-back, affable Heskett—a fan of both the Indiana Pacers and singer Ed Sheeran—things got real bad, then worse, before they got better.

He grew up a middle child, loving sports and the outdoors, and graduated from Indiana University with a public affairs degree and a desire to work in the nonprofit sector. But he wound up selling retirement and insurance funds and then put in nearly five years at a distributor for industrial and safety products.

Heskett's problems trace back to his senior year in high school, when he drunkenly smashed his hand against a concrete slab and broke a finger. He was given the painkiller Percocet—but went through all three refills quickly and experienced physical withdrawal. "You feel achy, like you have a cold," he says, "sweating one moment, freezing the next, no appetite, no energy."

Like so many Americans in the past decade, Heskett became addicted to opioids. A childhood friend introduced him to OxyContin, which fed his habit for a while. "But they were hard to find and expensive," he says. So one day when he was experiencing particularly bad withdrawal symptoms, a friend offered him something stronger, cheaper and more available: heroin, which he started snorting.

"By that point," he says, "both my parents and brother had kicked me out." What's worse, his job, sensing he was addicted, offered help but only if he was up front with them about his substance abuse. "But I denied it," he says. They let him resign and gave him a severance package.

He's certain he contracted hep C when he switched from snorting heroin to injecting. "I'd always said that I'd never do that because there would be no going back," he says. But once, when

friends who were also using had an extra needle, he did it. Going forward, he wasn't always careful to use clean syringes and paraphernalia.

By late 2015, he was sleeping in his car or various trailer homes. "Every minute revolved around finding money for drugs," he says. His moment of clarity arrived when the trailer home he was staying in was busted for drugs; mercifully, the cops just told him to scram.

"I left with nowhere to go, no money, no gas in my car," says Heskett. "I'd run out of options and didn't know what else to do. So I called my parents." They told him he could come home for two days while he made other arrangements. That's how he ended up at Fairbanks, where he'd gone before, urged by family and friends. "But this time I wanted to be there." Thankfully, after a day's wait, the state's Healthy Indiana health insurance plan agreed to cover his stay.

After a week of inpatient detox, he moved across the street to Fairbanks's supportive living 12-step-based program and ended up staying there for 10 months. This time, he says, "I was willing to do whatever they told me to. The biggest breakthrough for me was understanding the power of the drug. I'd thought I was weak and lacked willpower."

Yet while in recovery, he also received a diagnosis that didn't surprise him: He tested positive for HCV. "There were so many times I was sick from withdrawal and used somebody else's syringe," he says. "The addiction overrides every thought." Although Indianapolis had needle exchanges at the time, Heskett says he was unaware of them.

His primary care doctor referred him to a local hepatologist at Franciscan Health who found that his liver already had quite a bit of scarring—but also that his hep C viral load was low. Over time, though, it shot up into the millions, and Heskett lost weight, energy and appetite.

"I thought I was just depressed, but the doctor said she could see the jaundice in my eyes," he says. By this point, he was working at Fairbanks rehab as a peer coach for adolescent groups, so he had new health insurance, which initially refused his treatment. "But Franciscan kept fighting for me, and one day they said, 'Congrats, we got the approval.'"

Heskett started taking the HCV drug Harvoni in December 2017. "I had no side effects except for a three-day span where I got a bad migraine around midnight," he says. Eight weeks later, he tested clear for hep C but remained on the drug for another four weeks. He's been hep C–free ever since.

"Reach out to your primary doctor or someone to try to walk you through the process," is his advice for anyone newly diagnosed with HCV. "I didn't know where to start at all. But there is a cure, and you don't have to be stuck with hep C the rest of your life."

At first, he says, he was ashamed of his diagnosis. (In fact, when he talked to a local paper about his recovery a while back, he withheld his hep C diagnosis.) But then he heard that the Indiana Addiction Issues Coalition was looking for someone to speak publicly about his or her HCV journey. "I realized that maybe somebody out there needs to hear my story to give them that boost to get the treatment they need," he says. So he stepped up.

Thus began his new side career as a hep C activist. Not only does he continue to speak publicly for the coalition, but he also volunteers for the organization Overdose Lifeline, which does overdose education and prevention, particularly by promoting training in the use of the overdose reversal drug Narcan to first responders, police and drug users.

Life has treated him well the past year, he says—except for one heartbreak. In recovery, he began dating another recovering opioid user. But she started using again and fatally overdosed. Heskett got the news after attending a 12-step meeting.

“I couldn’t have handled that if I hadn’t been sober,” he says. “I reached out and had about 100 people calling me, checking on me, giving me a ride to work, to meetings, bringing me food. A friend said, ‘I’m coming to get you,’ and I said, ‘No,’ and he said, ‘Screw you, I’m coming.’ Sometimes it’s hard to let people help me.” He also went to a grief and trauma therapist.

Since then, he’s been Fairbanks’s employer services coordinator, meaning that he is the liaison between addiction patients and their jobs. “I get to advocate for the patient to have more treatment after detox, instead of just going straight back to work,” he says. “That’s very cool because I lost a job where they wanted to help me. I see people come in broken, and I get to try to keep their spirits up, share my own story and keep them hopeful and motivated.”

Running races and playing guitar are not the only new pastimes in his life. Before his girlfriend died, the couple went skydiving together. Recently, Heskett went again—with her dad. “That was bittersweet,” he says. “I feel she sends me little reminders that I’m on the right path. I’ll be driving home and notice a big sunbeam breaking through the clouds—and I know that’s her.”

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