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A Twice-Told Tale of Addiction: By Father, by Son

By CHARLES McGRATH

David Sheff and his 25-year-old son, Nic, are so close these days, so much on the same wavelength, that they sometimes finish each other's sentences. There was a time when they weren't even speaking.

Both Sheffs have books just out — each, coincidentally, beginning with an epigram from [John Lennon](#) — and over breakfast in New York recently they described in almost exactly the same terms the experience of reading the other's work.

“It was very, very painful,” Nic Sheff said.

“It was excruciating,” his father said.

Nic's book, “Tweak: Growing Up on [Methamphetamines](#),” is a first-person account of his drug addiction, which began while he was still in high school (where he learned to shoot up from studying a diagram on the Internet) and lasted for more than a decade. For much of that time he was living on the street, prostituting himself, selling drugs occasionally (though he was never very good at it) and eating food salvaged from Dumpsters; he would turn up in his parents' lives occasionally, sometimes to steal from them. (David Sheff and Nic's mother divorced when Nic was 4; she moved to Los Angeles, and Nic grew up with his father in Northern California.)

In and out of treatment numerous times, Nic had several brushes with the law and once nearly died of an overdose. Another time he almost lost an arm when an infected needle puncture grew to the size of a baseball.

In the first half of the book, especially, he writes about these experiences with harrowing vividness and detachment, as if he were watching someone else. He says that the first time he took meth, it felt like a gift, and he thought, “My God, this is what I’ve been missing my entire life.”

David’s book, “Beautiful Boy: A Father’s Journey Through His Son’s Addiction,” which goes on sale on Tuesday and has been selected by Starbucks as its next featured book, is the same story seen through the father’s eyes. He describes how a seemingly gilded youth (Nic was an honor student and co-captain of the high school water polo team) went almost overnight from casual marijuana use — just a phase, one of his teachers said — to full-blown addiction. In the beginning, David writes, he was in denial, then he was hurt and angry, and ultimately, in his worry and preoccupation and efforts to understand what happened, he became, in effect, addicted to his son’s addiction, unable to stop torturing himself. What had he done wrong?

“Reading Dad’s book, the thing that popped out that I hadn’t fully understood was how much I hurt people,” Nic said. “I had this idea that if I wanted to kill myself, it was my own business — no one had a right to me. And the thing I saw from the book is that killing yourself is such a selfish act that affects so many people. But when you’re in the middle of addiction, you don’t see that. All you see is your own pain. Part of my recovery is knowing that all these people are depending on me.”

David said: “For me, the hardest part about reading Nic’s book is that, bad as I imagined things were, they were even worse. The volume of drugs he was taking, the dangerous situations he was in over and over again. I never knew that he almost let his arm fall off. I was in pretty bad shape for a while after reading all this, even as I respected his truth-telling.”

David Sheff's book, published by Houghton Mifflin, grew out of an article he wrote for The New York Times Magazine in 2005. The same article prompted an editor at Atheneum to get in touch with Nic. Roughly halfway through, each book was temporarily derailed. David suffered a brain hemorrhage, and Nic, who had been clean for 18 months, relapsed. He writes about the setback, which involved resuming a destructive romantic relationship, in such a way that the reader can feel it coming almost before the author does.

The experience and his subsequent effort to straighten himself out yet again accounts, Nic said, for the change in his book's tone in the second half. "I started feeling and making connections," he said. "Before, I was tending to invent myself as a kind of fictional character and not really owning the things that were happening to me."

For David's part, he had to learn how to write all over again, starting with very short sentences and then linking them together. The hemorrhage, he recalls in "Beautiful Boy," had left him with a brain that was like a broken suitcase, full of scrambled items that he had to fit together.

"That's what writing is," he said. "Putting the pieces of the puzzle back together in your head."

His son's last relapse was devastating, he added, and he almost gave up the idea of intervening once more. Nic, who had been discovered breaking into his mother's garage, was resisting the idea of treatment, and his parents gave him an ultimatum: a return to rehab or jail.

"I'm so super-grateful he didn't give up on me," Nic said at breakfast. "I'd be dead."

Nic has been straight now for two and a half years — a significant milestone, his father says, since it typically takes two years before the brain scans of former meth addicts resemble normal scans. What makes the drug so pernicious is that it seems to rewire the addict's neural circuits.

Nic lives now in Savannah, Ga., with his girlfriend and is working on a second book, a novel about homeless teenagers and the end of the world. He also works as a model at a local art school.

“Taking your clothes off in front of people, that's nothing compared to writing the book,” he said, and added, “The whole point of my recovery is not to hide who I am, but to embrace it.”

David Sheff has meanwhile resumed his career as a magazine journalist. (He is a longtime contributing editor to Playboy magazine, for which he did the last interview with John Lennon.) “Much as I love my son, I had to learn to separate myself from him,” he said.

“We were really entangled,” David explained. “It's a baffling thing. People of my generation, we were going to be different. It's a fantasy of not growing up ourselves, I suppose, and there's a danger in not knowing whether to be a parent or a friend.”

He added that he still thought all the time about what he might have done differently. “I think I could have intervened sooner,” he said. “Before Nic turned 18, I could have forced him into a program. I could have dragged him in, and at least it would have gotten him off the streets.”

Nic said: “I think maybe I'm a little bit stupid. I'm super-flawed, I know that, and I really benefit from knowing that I'm an addict. If I had a glass of wine now, I wouldn't be capable of not going out and buying a

bottle of vodka. My brain is such that I could not not do that. And I don't know that I could have learned that any quicker. I had to go through the trial-and-error process. But on the other hand, I'm lucky to be alive, so it's a hard thing to say to parents, 'Just let them learn on their own.'