

The lonely road of staying clean

In a town where pills are currency, opioid addicts have few options

JASPER, Ala.

Jessica Kilpatrick was in the middle of a 10-hour shift at Burger King when she checked her phone messages. Right away she knew. It was the canned voice of the community corrections office ordering her in for a random drug test.

Jessica put her headset back on and tried to stay calm. She looked into a mirror. She was hot and greasy and smelled like a Croissan'wich, but her eyes were clear and her mind was straight, unglazed by opioid painkillers. She had not missed a single day of work in 11 months.

"Have a blessed one," a customer shouted from the drive-through, and Jessica, who was 33, hollered back in her raspy twang, "You do the same."

She had learned in recovery to focus on the positive and not let the old voices get too loud, so on the drive to the courthouse later she thought of the calendar she kept at home on her nightstand. For every day she stayed clean, she marked another X.

"Eighteen months so far," Jessica said, with both hands on the wheel. "Eighteen months and a week."

But for every hopeful X, there was still the landscape beyond her windshield. Doctors in Alabama prescribe more opioid painkillers than physicians in any other state in the nation. The heavy prescribers are scattered across Walker County, and Jessica knew their offices. The pills are so enmeshed in the local economy that they're traded for lawn mowers and school clothes.

Jessica passed the chicken plant where she had once deboned birds and pulled livers for \$8.60 an hour, sometimes high on Roxycodone. For as long as she could remember, pills made the intolerable possible. Now, without them, she was a poor woman in a poor town with a swollen right foot from a 10-hour shift and a new key tag from Narcotics Anonymous that said "Clean and Serene for Eighteen months."

"I'm terrified when I go in there," Jessica said as she stood outside the courthouse in Jasper.

Anything could go wrong on a drug test. Lost paperwork, a lab error, someone's bad mood, Jessica was at the mercy of a system that was overwhelmed with addiction. This time she was told that there was no female on duty to collect a urine sample. It would have to be a saliva test. She followed a man to a desk.

"They're saying tornadoes," he said, bringing out a saliva kit. Jessica stuck the swab in her mouth. They carried on their small talk, with Jessica garbling her words, until it was time to put the swab back in the see-through container.

The man leaned back in his chair. Jessica was at the edge of hers, staring at the container on the desk. A minute passed, then another. Jessica's cheeks went red. "This one's sure taking a while," she said, forcing a smile. The man's chair squeaked as he reached for the container. "Okay, we're good," he said, dropping it in the trash.

She went out to her truck, one step closer to 19 months.

Everyone in this white, rural county of 67,000 has a theory about what happened here.

It was the global economy that took away the coal-mining jobs. It was Purdue Pharma marketing OxyContin as a less-addictive painkiller. It

was greedy doctors who needed to pay for their beach condos in Gulf Shores. It was the druggies and scammers abusing the system. It was God being taken out of the schools. It was the government allowing Medicaid patients to get \$800 worth of painkillers for a \$6 co-pay. It was too few jobs and too many with headsets.

It was 21st-century America, a place so lonely for some that only pills could fill the void.

The void runs deepest in one group — white, working-class women in rural areas. In the past 15 years, their death rate has risen more sharply than any other demographic in the United States, studies show. Opioid drugs, alcohol and suicide have been the main contributors, with assistance from economic isolation, anxiety over a loss of security and the comfort offered by Purdue Pharma.

Here in Walker County, an hour northwest of Birmingham, the death rate for women 35 to 44 years old has increased by 170 percent since 1999, an analysis by The Washington Post shows.

Two generations of prescription painkillers have changed the way people die here. Even more, they have changed the way people live. Great-grandparents are now raising the children of addicted parents and grandparents. Four out of 5 arrests in the county are drug-related. Every week a local newspaper called Just Busted publishes the arrest photos, the exhausted faces on display in most minimarts next to the \$14.99 synthetic urine products guaranteed to fool drug screenings.

Stuck in this landscape where she has spent her whole life, Jessica Kilpatrick drove home from the courthouse on a two-lane road. She had a splitting headache but feared aspirin might show up in her urine so she rubbed her temples. The employee discount hamburger on the seat beside her was for her husband. In four days, he was leaving for prison. Jessica had just found out.

“They say God won’t give you more than you can handle,” she said as she turned into the driveway. “I’m beginning to wonder.”

He was on the porch with a paintbrush when she came walking up. “Honey, that door looks so good!” Jessica said, kissing his cheek. “And thank you for that laundry lamp.”

Jeremy Horton wiped his hands with a rag. “Jess, I can’t believe this is happening,” he said. “My stomach is just wrenched up.”

Nine years ago, while high on drugs, Jeremy robbed a Pizza Hut and a minimart by flashing a knife. He was charged with two counts of armed robbery, but the 2007 case languished in Walker County’s backlogged court system until January, when his lawyer called to say he should start getting ready for four years in prison. By then, Jeremy had been clean for a year and had a good job at an aluminum company. He and Jessica had turned a filthy \$600-a-month rental property into a home with teal walls and scrubbed baseboards.

“I’m worried you are not going to be able to keep this house,” Jeremy said as they leaned on the porch rail.

“We are not gonna lose it,” Jessica said, though she was not 100 percent sure. “I got a housecleaning job lined up. And I’m gonna be feeding Tyler’s dog, too, when he goes on vacation.”

Jeremy ran a hand through his short silver hair. “How did we end up at the point we did?” he asked.

Jessica gazed out at the yard. It started long before she met Jeremy, beginning with a childhood set on edge by a violent alcoholic father. The only time she felt safe was when she was playing sports. During a high school volleyball game in the 10th grade, she injured her spinal cord and was prescribed OxyContin. By 17, Jessica was crushing and snorting the pills. With a copy of her MRI, Jessica said she could leave a doctor’s office with prescriptions for 120 Roxicodone pills in 30-milligram strength, 90 additional Roxicodones in 15 mg strength, and 120 blue bars of Xanax — a total of 330 pills with fresh refills in a month.

There were periods of being clean followed by relapse. Jessica got pregnant at 26 and had a daughter. But after a second trip to jail for drugs, she lost custody to the girl’s father. Her marriage to Jeremy was supposed to be a fresh start. They had two sons. But neither could stay away from using. One night Jeremy was home giving the boys a bath when he forgot what Jessica told him about always having the pajamas near the tub before running the water. He went to get them, and when he came back to the bathroom, the 1-year-old was underwater.

Paramedics revived the boy, but at the hospital they noticed bruised bite marks. Jeremy explained the bite marks were from his brother, but no one was inclined to believe him after the tub. Jessica showed up at the hospital so high she was stealing packets of sugar and ketchup. Soon after, they lost custody of the boys to Jeremy’s aunt and then Jessica started using heroin. In less than a year, her 30-year-old brother died of an overdose and a storage facility disposed of her life’s possessions for non-payment.

And then 18 months ago, she made a decision. “I couldn’t take one more day of hating myself,” she said. She borrowed some clothes and caught a ride to a Narcotics Anonymous meeting.

Jeremy got clean, too, and they threw themselves into jobs and fixing up the rental house. They got a swing set for the yard. They put bunk beds in one bedroom and the other they painted girly mauve. Jessica’s daughter, now 7, began visiting, but seeing the boys was more difficult. Jeremy’s aunt limited visitation to four hours every other Sunday at her house, and they still hadn’t told the boys that their father was going to prison.

Jessica was still processing it herself. What would it mean for him to be gone and for everything to be entirely on her? In the morning, she read her daily meditations from NA, looking for illuminations, while Jeremy busied himself with home repairs. He brought in dropcloths and tools. Jessica figured it was good for him to stay busy. “We’re gonna need a shut-off valve for the toilet,” he called from the bathroom. “And a threshold for the door. And the tile.”

Jessica stood in the doorway, her mind spinning on money and how she would soon have even less. “What about a laminate floor?” she asked.

“I don’t want flooring, Jess,” he said, holding a measuring tape. “It’s just 29 extra dollars for a box of tile, with all the things we need?”

She leaned in the doorway of the small bathroom. “We’ll have to do that on down the line,” she said, carefully.

Money was only part of the reason she was feeling overwhelmed. The other part was staying clean. Pills were everywhere, and she couldn’t avoid seeing them. Planks and bricks and tabs, they fell out of customers’ pockets as they dug for their money in Burger King. From the drive-through window, Jessica saw a syringe on a car seat and a meth pipe on the floorboards. She knew who the dealers were, and after she took their wadded-up cash she went straight to the sink to wash her hands, afraid that an illegal substance might seep into her skin.

If she ran into someone from her old life, she made it quick. “Miss Eleanor said don’t spend more than six seconds with someone ’cuz any longer you’ll

start entertaining ideas," Jessica said, quoting one of the few professionally trained people who factored into her day-to-day struggles.

The real Miss Eleanor was sitting behind the desk of a crowded room one evening when Jessica arrived with her notebook. In a system strained by addiction, Eleanor Powers was a part-time contractor charged with leading all the counseling classes in the county's drug court program. A 72-year-old African American woman, she looked out at the room full of white faces.

"Good evening," she said. "How was everyone's week? More than adequate, I hope?"

Jessica raised her hand. "I been on an emotional roller coaster," she said. "Jeremy's being taken into custody. I'm so afraid it's going to change him. I'm fearing it."

"I'm prayin' for y'all," someone said.

"I am, too," said another.

Jessica explained how she was trying to stay busy, arranging a visit to the detox unit at the local hospital to help other addicts.

"Don't allow yourself in service to be so focused on others, because your recovery is most important," Miss Eleanor said.

"Yes, ma'am," Jessica said.

In the back of the room, a woman bounced a baby on her lap. Another volunteered that her husband had relapsed. "He did good until he got back to Walker County," she said. "Screwed him right up."

"You can't blame Walker County," said a skinny young man.

"People, places and things, you have to get away from them," Miss Eleanor said, knowing that few in the room had the resources to do that.

A woman in her 40s who worked at Chick-fil-A raised her hand. "When we graduate, that's gonna be tough," she said. "This here is a safe haven. The world out there is real scary."

"That's why completing this course will only get you to graduate," Miss Eleanor said. "You've got to make the changes within. That old adage, 'Association can lead to assimilation.' I believe you can lead a horse to water."

"But it's hard," said a blond woman in her late 50s. "Some people don't know no other way. I have to tell my own children not to come to my house because they are using. I can see it with my own eyes now."

They were all in the final phase of the drug court program. Upon graduation, the felony charge that brought them into the program would be dropped. For Jessica, it was too late; she was already a felon. She needed to graduate to show a judge that she was a fit enough mother to get her kids back. The problem was she still owed the county \$2,600 in old fines. Until they were paid, she would be ineligible to graduate, and without Jeremy's income, coming up with \$2,600 seemed more remote than ever.

"We'll see you next week," she told Miss Eleanor at the end of the class, and drove to Burger King for the overnight shift.

Three days before Jeremy was to turn himself in, Jessica surprised him with a going-away party. Family and friends pitched in with food and liters of soda. Store-bought cakes crowded the counter as the two dozen guests, most from Narcotics Anonymous, juggled paper plates in the overcast afternoon.

The two youngest guests were 5 and 2, and on the swing set. Jeremy's aunt had brought the boys over to say goodbye to their father.

"Push harder, Mama," yelled Kaleb, 5, trying to go higher in the swing.

"Kick your feet out, hon," Jessica yelled, giving her oldest son another heave.

"Me," yelled Kyson, 2, who wanted another push.

Of all the things Jessica was worrying about, her ability to parent wasn't one of them. She knew she could do it this time. She worried about back-to-school clothes. How would she be able to pay for them? In the old days, it would have been easy. Twenty Roxi 30s for pants, shirts and shoes. Her friends in NA assured her that all parents sweated back-to-school expenses. But September wasn't so far away.

As the boys and their father charged into the blue room with the bunk beds to play a video game, Jessica followed but stayed in a corner, letting Jeremy have his time.

"We're playing Spider-Man!" Kaleb said when a guest wandered by the door. "It's what Daddy taught me!"

Jeremy, in work boots and a Crimson Tide ball cap, stood behind each son and helped with the remote control. "Share now, let brother try it," he said, handing the controller to Kyson. Jessica's daughter, Makena, was on the floor next to the boys dressing up a white kitten. Jessica leaned against the wall, watching the scene she had always imagined.

"All three of my babies, I tell ya," she said, smiling. But the afternoon flew by and finally it was time to tell the boys. The five of them went out into the yard, Jessica willing herself to go through with delivering the hard news.

"Daddy's gotta help someone for a couple years," Jeremy explained, kneeling in the grass, his hand on each of his sons' shoulders. "Daddy messed up, and now he's gotta help some people. But Mommy will still be here."

Kaleb, the 5-year-old, turned to Jessica. "Is it the classes that help you fix your broken parts?"

Jessica smiled, barely able to speak. "Mommy's not going anywhere," she said. "Mommy's not leaving again."

"Daddy, when can I come home?" Kaleb asked.

"Son, as soon as Daddy gets all his broken parts fixed," Jeremy said, and Jessica had to squeeze her eyes shut. In three days, she would be alone, too.

On Jeremy's last night of freedom, Jessica had to work the overnight shift. She got home at 4:30 a.m. and by 7 she was dressing for court.

"Hey, Jess, will you come in here and get this necklace off me?" Jeremy called from the bathroom. He had shaved his beard and hair to avoid

catching lice as he did during his previous stay in the county jail. He wore a white T-shirt and white boxers so he wouldn't get cold when they took his clothes.

Jessica unfastened his necklace. "The bathroom looks so pretty," she said, desperate for a distraction. The dog paced in nervous circles in the hallway.

The hearing was on the third floor of the courthouse. When Jessica saw her best friend step off the elevator, she rushed over. Paige Britton was a mother of four and a year into recovery from painkillers and Xanax. "It's all right," she said, hugging Jessica, who was starting to crack. Seeing the women in orange jail scrubs and shackles gave Jessica a sick feeling of déjà vu.

In the courtroom, she held Jeremy's hand. His plea agreement called for four years in prison, but they were hoping the judge would send him to a work-release program instead. "Do you think he knows how good we been doing?" Jeremy whispered to Jessica.

After nearly a decade of waiting, it was over in 15 minutes. Jessica watched him walk to the bench. Details of the two 2007 robberies were quickly summarized. Jeremy gave a plain apology. The judge peered over his glasses. "It's my understanding that you've done well," he said. "But one has to pay the consequences." He had two hours to turn himself in at the county jail.

They got to the jail early, hoping it would show good faith and that someone might notice, but no one did. They stood outside the inmate entrance. They both knew what waited inside — a lot of dope and not a single recovery meeting of any kind. Tears ran down Jessica's cheeks. Jeremy held her face. "If you got any problems with the house, call me," he said.

Then a corrections officer appeared. He jangled his keys. "Ready when you are, boss," he said.

The Burger King on Highway 78 was lit up when Jessica arrived for her shift that night.

The broiler would need to be broken down and cleaned. The supply truck that was coming in around 2 a.m. would need to be unloaded. Jessica took pride in her job, but it was difficult to ignore what her life had become. She had no husband at home, no kids at home, no money in the bank and after pulling another all-nighter at work, she had to be at the courthouse at 8:30 a.m. for another drug test. She was alone. Slipping back would be so easy.

"Welcome to Burger King, my name is Jessica, how may I help you?" she said as a car pulled into the drive-through, trying to care about the answer.

A few minutes later, she looked up to see a small crowd at the counter. Five friends from her NA group were standing there. "You can't get rid of us, can you?" one woman joked. She was in her 30s, a hardcore meth addict as well as a dealer, and now had been six months clean.

"Y'all are so sweet," Jessica said. "Is this for here or to go?"

"To go?" another said. "We ain't goin' anywhere."

One by one, they took their trays into the dining room. When they all had their food, they reached for each other's hands. "Jessica," one of them called toward the counter.

She didn't have any customers, so she went out to see what they wanted. They all stood in a circle together with bowed heads, and she decided to join them. They gave thanks for their food, for the fellowship and for having stayed clean for one more day. The six recovering addicts held onto each other, and none held on more tightly than Jessica, trying to make it to 19 months.

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