

Prescription for addiction: Man's struggle with opiates led him on a path to destruction

By TRISTAN SCOTT of the Missoulian



“When you're in the depths of a serious drug addiction, moral value, all that goes out the window,” says Andrew Bagley, who is serving a 15-year sentence for breaking into a Missoula pharmacy and stealing more than \$8,000 worth of OxyContin.

Photographed by KURT WILSON/Missoulian

For the better part of a decade, Andrew Bagley awoke each morning to a habit, a willful scourge that demanded a quick fix before coffee, a maintenance high to get out of bed.

Ask him to start from the beginning and Bagley, 25, raises a dubious eyebrow and lets slip a good-natured chortle.

“How much do you want to know?” he says. “I don't want to shock anyone. I mean this isn't exactly mainstream stuff.”

It isn't. And to grasp Bagley's entire history would be to inhabit the nightmarish reality of his addiction to opiate painkillers.

But as with many stories born of addiction and told by recovering addicts who have seen the bottom rise quickly, Bagley delivers his with unguarded candor and a lack of vanity; rather than downplay the harrowing details, he nicks at his ego with self-effacing barbs, their scars an emblem of his survivorship.

“This isn't something that discriminates as to whether you're rich, poor - race doesn't matter, nothing matters,” he says. “I mean I broke into a pharmacy. **When you're in the depths of a serious drug addiction, moral value, all that goes out the window.**”

Bagley is serving a 15-year sentence - five in the custody of the Department of Corrections, 10 more on probation - for burglarizing a pharmacy in Missoula and stealing \$8,200 worth of the powerful narcotic OxyContin (roughly 3,000 pills). Oxy wasn't his drug of choice. He preferred fentanyl, an opiate more than 80 times stronger than morphine, or maybe a few grams of heroin that hadn't been “stepped on,” or adulterated, en route from Mexico to the Treasure State.

Still, Oxy ranked high in his opiate echelon, and anything was better than being dope-sick at 2 o'clock on a Monday morning.

“It wasn't my goal to stockpile 3,000 Oxy. It was my goal to get through the night,” Bagley said recently over a veggie omelet and hash browns at a Missoula cafe. “I was just getting normal to where I could talk to people without throwing up.”

In June, Bagley moved back to town from the Butte Pre-release Center, a halfway house where he spent the last year attending treatment and group therapy, working a full-time job as a cook and assimilating back into the community as a “normy” - what recovering addicts call nonaddicts. Now he's living on “conditional

release,” in Corrections' parlance, looking for a new job and trying to enroll in college classes. He's working hard at moving on with his life.

“It's funny because in recovery you're taught to live one day at a time. But it was a day at a time as a dope addict, too,” he said.

These days, however, things seem to be getting easier for Bagley, one day at a time, whereas 16 months ago, each day brought new challenges - namely, how to hustle up some water-soluble opiate analgesics, or anything else that could be sucked into a syringe and mainlined.

On that final day in May 2007, not long before police recognized Bagley on a surveillance video, he hadn't injected himself in 24 hours, and the first tremors of dope sickness had clambered up his spinal column and were playing the marimba. This, he knew, was the precursor to withdrawal, an agonizing affliction that lasts several weeks and is unique to dope addicts.

“When you're sick, minutes seem like hours, hours seem like days, days seem like years,” Bagley said. “You get to about day two, day three, and you want to kill yourself or take another shot. I was never so much worried about going to treatment as I was worried about getting sick.”

The morning after the burglary, Bagley was still monumentally high. Sitting in a police interrogation room in downtown Missoula, he slurred his confession and nodded off midsentence. After he purloined the pharmacy's entire supply of Oxy, he had stopped in a nearby alleyway and shot an impossibly large dose. He was still flying five hours later.

By late afternoon, he was shaking like a leaf in a jail cell, wishing he had some methadone - or a chocolate bar to take the edge off. For almost two weeks, the symptoms of opiate withdrawal gnawed at Bagley.

“I believe it was the only way for me to get off of junk,” he said. “When I was using, I'd go one day without and then just throw in the towel.”

Ironically, the scheme was all part of a plan to get clean and enjoy six months of sober living. Bagley had socked away his belongings in storage, where they would remain through the spring and summer while he worked as a cook on the edge of Glacier National Park, far removed from the cycle of drug use in which he'd become mired. He decided he was in need of ballast, something to stabilize his life before it spun out of control.

But then the habit, with no regard for his get-up-and-go-get-clean plan, demanded another shot.

“In that time between making a decision to get clean and actually leaving town, I burglarized a pharmacy and got thrown in jail,” he said. “In hindsight, it probably saved my life.”

A product of upper-middle-class privilege, raised by well-heeled Southern stock, Bagley spent his formative years in Tupelo, Miss. He went to church on Sundays, played soccer and baseball, made good grades and developed a strong interest in music and art, and in musicians and artists.

At age 12 he started smoking pot, and a year later began experimenting with LSD. One day, he ate too much acid and wound up in a hospital emergency room, trying to explain the situation to his father, an old-fashioned authoritarian. His drug use reached a plateau when he started using cocaine, but then only through the first couple years of high school. Soon he was turned on to heroin.

From his family's suburban home in Tupelo, it was a short bus ride to Memphis, Tenn., where a few grams of skag could be bought with ease in the park or on a street corner. And so began his love affair with the needle, at age 16, with an adolescent arm clenched between crossed legs, like he'd been instructed to do by his friends' older brothers, and even one friend's mother, who was a nurse and knew how to prevent abscesses, avoid cotton fever and keep from butchering the vein.

What started out as a weekend pastime turned into an every-other-day junk habit, and then escalated to daily use.

"I never thought I'd be a full-fledged junkie, but at whatever point I crossed the line - at 16 or 17 when I got the habit - I never considered turning back," Bagley says. "I was young. I just thought it was going to be a phase for the longest time. But it was my baby. It was my thing. And nobody was going to tell me I couldn't have it."

His parents tried, though, and Bagley spent most of the following year in a 10-month inpatient drug rehabilitation center. It didn't take. Nothing did.

"There are two outcomes in treatment: You either become a better person or you become a better liar," he says. "I always came out on the bad side."

In recovery, Bagley honed his skills as a teenage sociopath, whetting his innate ability to charm, and manipulate, whoever came within reach. It would become a useful talent down the road, when he was injecting \$250 worth of opiate painkillers into his arm every day and money was harder to come by without a few similarly driven friends hanging around.

"I would say I was living a double life, but really it was three or four different lives," Bagley says. "I couldn't be totally honest about anything."

His ambition to play guitar, bass and percussion was overshadowed by his fascination with the musicians whose genius and mystique seemed to relate directly to their drug use - Nirvana's Kurt Cobain, Alice in Chains' Layne Staley and Blind Melon's Shannon Hoon, all of whom died of drug overdoses and reportedly led **tormented lives of addiction**.

"I had all these aspirations, but ultimately my love for music and art couldn't compete with my love for dope," Bagley said.

In 2002, fed up with the scene in Memphis, Bagley headed to Eugene, Ore., believing a change of scenery and some distance from big-city life would do him good.

"I thought that if I moved across the country I could stay clean," he said. "That lasted about a week."

He fell into the same routine in Oregon, and after six months he moved to Missoula, where he landed a job working in a kitchen at a local restaurant.

Mature beyond his years, with a rich baritone drawl, Bagley is charming in conversation and appears earnest about his ambitions. Whatever the allure, people in Missoula were immediately drawn to him, and felt compelled to stand behind him, even when they suspected some things just weren't quite right. Bosses agreed to cash advances and turned a blind eye to his 40-minute bathroom breaks, paying no attention to his torpor and weight loss.

When a supervisor walked into a bathroom stall where Bagley was shooting up one day, those misgivings could no longer be ignored. He was fired, but left with the promise of a good reference, and soon he found work in another kitchen. But not for long.

Finding the money to feed his drug habit was a tedious daily battle, and buying the drugs meant surrounding himself with addicts and drug dealers, who perpetuated the cycle of addiction and gave him little hope of ever escaping.

“I’d do a wake-up fix every morning, and if I didn’t have a wake-up, I’d hustle some money to get a wake-up.”

Each morning began with a sacred ritual, with Bagley crushing a few pills or squeezing the narcotic goo from a fentanyl patch into the bowl of a spoon, scanning his stash drawer for a clean needle and slipping its beveled tip into the soft crook of his arm. The needle was as much a part of his drug habit as the drugs themselves, and he would peak the instant he closed the plunger against the barrel.

But fix or no fix, he opened his eyes each morning tormented by the same addiction, befogged by the same opiate veil, which lifted the moment he hit that gleaming spike, but then only for an instant. A few erratic breaths later, after his eyes recalibrated, the trepidation would settle over him, and Bagley would understand one thing acutely - within six or eight hours, the first waves of dope sickness would be upon him, demanding another shot.

“It was a grind. I began to almost welcome an overdose. I never contemplated suicide - it just seemed like a coward’s way out - but I started to think, ‘Maybe the next shot will be the one to do it,’” Bagley said. **“After a while, you just get to be sick and tired of being sick and tired. My daily dope habit controlled every aspect of my life.”**

In particular, it controlled his criminal impulses. He sold his BMW - “all that money went into my arm” - and would easily squander two months’ worth of rent money on oxycodone, fentanyl, morphine or heroin. He began casing alleyways for unlocked garages to steal power tools, radios or anything else of value, and stole from the homes of his friends, who were often too high to care or take notice.

The night of the break-in, Bagley threw a rock through the pharmacy’s glass entrance and, once inside, crawled up and over a partition to access the storage area where the drugs were kept. Police reviewing the surveillance footage recognized Bagley from a previous run-in with the law - he was convicted of misdemeanor partner assault and witness tampering in July 2005, when he shoved a female friend while high on opiates. He also broke her mobile phone so she couldn’t call home.

That woman was on hand during Bagley’s sentencing hearing last year, and said his behavior only became violent because of his drug use, which was severe by any standard.

A chemical dependency counselor who had evaluated him also spoke at the hearing, and said Bagley reported using multiple opiates on a daily basis, listing morphine, oxycodone, heroin, fentanyl and methadone - his drugs of choice.

“I think Andrew is older than his years in his addiction,” the counselor said. “He’s a severely addicted individual and his crime was directly related to his addiction. He’s a persistent daily user of massive amounts of chemicals - quantities that could kill an ordinary person. He is an extraordinary case.”

Before a judge imposed the sentence, Bagley apologized to his victims and expressed the will to overcome

his addiction.

“I don't want to become the career criminal that I might appear to be on paper,” he said.

In April, a month shy of his one-year sobriety mark, Bagley sat down in a booth at the Gold Rush Casino in Butte, where he worked as a cook during his stint at the prerelease center. He ordered an ice water and fired up a Marlboro.

Bagley was ready to move back to Missoula, where he had a girlfriend, and a number of employment possibilities. The girlfriend stuck by Bagley through his months of incarceration, even though they barely knew each other when he was arrested; she knew nothing of his addiction, so saw only an outline of the person he hoped to become.

When they first met, he tried to stop using for six weeks because he didn't want to ruin a new relationship the same way he had ruined others. His abstinence didn't last long, but still he managed to keep his drug use a secret until after his arrest. He figures the two became closer than ever when he finally came clean about the extent of his addiction.

“I have a new sense of pride and self-respect that wasn't there when I was doping,” he said. “There are so many people who went to bat for me again and again, and I did nothing but disappoint them. I can't do that again.”

The person who acknowledges those failures is more self-realized than the person whose sole ambition once was to get high. He can appreciate the consequences of his behavior, and understands how he hurt himself and others - his “victims,” a phrase that for years didn't make sense to him.

“I always justified what I was doing by telling myself I was the only victim,” he said. “That was the problem. I couldn't see how the collateral effects of my addiction actually hurt people.”

Twelve months into treatment, Bagley was on track to begin a new life, and his case manager, Steve Gallus, believed he had a good shot at success.

“He's been a really good resident and shows lots of initiative. He has a great work ethic,” Gallus said. “We give our residents a lot of help, but we don't hold hands, so Andrew's success is really his own.”

Gallus has represented District 37 in the Montana Senate since 2004, and before that served as a member of the Montana House of Representatives. In his view, the state's policymakers do not yet have a grasp of Montana's opiate problem.

“I was very surprised when I first took this job by the number of opiate abusers,” said Gallus, who serves on the subcommittee for corrections and public safety. “I was expecting a lot more meth, but it seems like nine out of 10 people are here for opiate abuse or fraudulently obtaining dangerous drugs.

“As far as opiates go, I've just been enlightened because I'm working on the front lines, so I don't expect my fellow state senators to understand, but I'd like to see the state focus a lot more resources on the opiate population,” Gallus said.

In meetings, interviews and group sessions, Gallus is privy to what seems like a never-ending conversation about opiates. Residents talk about committing crimes like burglary, theft and fraud, and the reason for their actions inevitably is addiction.

“Those three crimes are so closely related to opiate abuse,” he said. “We're spending so much money on security costs, on sally ports and double-perimeter razor wire fences and watchtowers. That's an appropriate setting for a type of criminal that does exist in Montana, but it's not an appropriate setting for nonviolent drug offenders. We can treat them for less money and with a higher success rate than incarcerating them. That's the bottom line. But our policymakers don't understand the extent of this opiate thing, especially OxyContin.”

Bagley appreciated the support he received from Gallus and other corrections officials, but was nervous about returning to Missoula, where he must rebuild his name and reputation in order to find a job.

“When I have nothing, I can definitely build something,” Bagley said. “I can't just sit around and do the whole woe-is-me thing. Otherwise there might not be a next time. I might end up dead.”

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