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MONDAY MAY 19, 2008 :: Last modified: Sunday, April 29, 2007 2:09 AM MDT

Out of the spiral

By CHRIS MERRILL
Star-Tribune correspondent

LANDER -- It's just after midnight on Aug. 1, 2006.

Darton Brown slumps on the sofa in his small-town home, on his quiet street, out of his mind from a hellish cocktail of prescription drugs and alcohol.

He has a .45-caliber pistol in his hand between his legs. Through his wide-open front door, he can look out on the street and see most of the 11 law enforcement officers surrounding his house.

Brown served as a volunteer firefighter for 10 years before back problems forced him to give up working side by side with law enforcement, and now, scanning the officers' faces, he knows every single one of them.

He hops off the sofa, paces around the house. He goes out on the porch and looks at the cops again, at the cordoned-off street, ignoring the officers' shouts for him to drop his weapon. In his crazed state, he thinks about the box of ammunition in the garage.

Brown collects classic toys, comic books and NASCAR paraphernalia. He has an impressive gun collection, which he's already started assembling on the floor in front of the sofa. He thinks about loading every single one of them, and then telling the cops to "bring it on."

Finally, he strolls to the porch, ejects the cartridge from his pistol, and gives himself up. Brown called 911 in the first place, after he'd assaulted his wife, Kriss, and threatened to kill her, after he'd failed to kill himself because the cartridge jammed.

Dialing 911 and finally giving himself up was the only remotely sane behavior he'd exhibited that night.

For those close to Brown, the story is nearly impossible to believe.

He's a big-hearted Iowa native, whom his friends, family, and wife of 27 years all knew to be a caring and generous man, active in the community, a one-time treasurer of the Lions Club and Boy Scout leader.

On that warm, still night in August, it was the first time in Brown's 45 years he'd ever been arrested -- for aggravated assault and domestic battery.

Functional for a long time

How had this hard-working nonviolent family man gone from an upstanding citizen and an asset to the community, to a drug addict and a genuine threat? The answer, as one might expect, is complicated.

"I never in my wildest dreams thought he'd ever lay his hands on me," says his wife, Kriss, who, in 27 years of marriage never felt physically threatened by him. "The meth influence just whacks out your thinking so much ... It's hard for the general public to understand how psychotic meth users can become."

After serving jail time, Brown went into round-the-clock, three-month treatment for substance abuse at Wyoming Substance Abuse Treatment and Recovery Center, or WYSTAR. While there, he realized that his biography included 33 years of use.



Chris Merrill, Star-Tribune correspondent Darton Brown of Lander listens while his wife, Kriss, talks about his recovery from drug and alcohol abuse.

When Brown was 11 years old, his parents moved from Des Moines to the rural countryside. They were having problems with their marriage, and it wasn't long after they moved before his father was mostly out of his life. He didn't know the whole story back then. He just knew that his dad usually wasn't around. By age 13, Brown started drinking alcohol and smoking pot with his brother and brother's friends. By the time he was 21, he'd tried almost every kind of drug outside of heroin.

Part of it was the circumstances, to be sure; his father's abandonment took an emotional toll on him. When his mother died in his early 20s, he admits, he struggled with the recurring helpless feeling of abandonment.

He grew up in 1970s America, a time that was marked at least in part by a generally permissive attitude toward drugs, and a prevailing point of view that drugs were mostly benign; something of a rite of passage for youths; and certainly nothing for law enforcement or communities to get too uptight about.

Like most people, Darton learned to cope with the emotional ordeals from his youth in his own way, and his alcohol and recreational drug use over the years was primarily "functional." He worked hard during the week, did well in his career, had a healthy marriage, and relegated the "use" to those times that didn't interfere with his public, professional or personal life.

By 1991, he and his wife had moved to Lander, and by '92 he'd joined the Lions Club, the volunteer fire department, and became a Scout leader. The '90s were good years, and he enjoyed being part of the community. He remembers his decade of service with the fire department with fondness and pride.

"Even though it was volunteer, being in the fire department was the best thing I've ever done in my life," he said.

The downward spiral

In 2002, everything that was good and stable in Brown's life started to fall apart.

He had worked for the cable company for eight years when he began experiencing some back pain, which he attributed to the normal progression of age. Even though he was in good shape, he was 42 years old, and some aches and pains were to be expected. One Friday night, after his work day was over, he told his boss that his back was hurting him "more than normal." It turned out to be worse than that.

"Saturday morning I woke up and I couldn't even walk," Brown said.

That agonizing morning led to what turned out to be the first of 13 surgeries over the next three years. For a man who had dropped out of school at 17, and who had never been unemployed since, he was about to face some serious down time, while being in constant pain, without being able to do any of the activities that had made his life fulfilling and worthwhile.

The original cyst, which had wrapped itself around his spinal cord and borne from the original disintegrated disc, was only an introduction to the problems he'd face over the next three and a half years.

"This wasn't your normal back surgery," Brown said.. The cyst wasn't a normal lump but a ring around the spine, which compressed the discs down to one-third their normal size.

"For eight weeks (after the surgery) he couldn't even sit," Kriss said. "He had to either stand (with a walker) or lie down."

"I'd go down to the fire hall for fire prevention and I'd be in a walker," he said. He never was able to return to active service.

At the same time, he started having related health problems, all of them painful, some of which required extremely invasive and temporarily emasculating procedures. As a result, several different doctors continuously wrote him prescriptions for medications to help alleviate his discomfort.

"OxyContin, hydrocodone, morphine, methadone, clonazepam," he said. "I had three doctors writing scripts at the same time."

"After one surgery I got home, and a month later I was feeling extremely sick and didn't know what was wrong with me. It finally got where I told my wife she had to take me to the ER," he said. It turned out that an infection had developed where they'd done the surgery, and a grapefruit-sized abscess had formed in his body cavity.

"It had opened up, and all that infection was going through my system," Brown said. "A couple days prior to that I'd gone into a seizure -- I didn't know that's what it was -- and my temperature went up past 105."

All of his surgeries were done in Jackson, so when he arrived at the ER in Lander and the doctors realized that an abscess had burst, they sent him there.

"They pumped me full of a bunch of morphine, and they sent me back over to Jackson. And by the time I got there I was almost dead," Brown said. "The way they described it, I was toxic ... The infection was going through my bloodstream."

At the same time, he fell into a bad depression, and started getting hooked on the prescription drugs that were so readily available to him. He was feeling sorry for himself, he said, and he was stuck at home, using that as an excuse to start getting high all day.

"I'd been healthy my whole life. That's when my depression started getting the better of me," he said. "I was missing a bunch of work and I was basically in bed after my first back surgery ... and things just kept getting worse and worse as time went on."

After missing more than two months of work at the cable company from his first surgery, he returned only to trip and break his ankle shortly thereafter. After healing from the ankle, he returned to work yet again.

"And the very first day, first morning, first job I go to I went up to talk to the customer -- it was an apartment building, and the stairs were outside -- and I came outside, put my foot on the first step and went down the whole flight of stairs," Brown said. "So I was out again for that, and that snowballed into some other problems, and then in the first part of April 2005, I talked to my boss in Riverton, and he said he'd talked to corporate and they said don't bother coming back. I'd been there eight years ... right about then is when I started using" methamphetamine, he said.

He began by snorting it, then smoking it. By February 2006 he had started "shooting" it.

His depression, followed by the meth addiction, had changed him, and it was destroying his marriage.

"It was a complete personality change," Kriss said.

No longer was he simply depressed: the methamphetamine was now causing bouts of mania, and he was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Brown refused to admit that he had any problem at all. After several attempts at intervention by his friends and family, his wife finally reached her limit and told him he had to get out of the house.

"I became extremely suicidal," he said. "My life had really spiraled down about as far as it could go, and I could see no reason to go on." He'd felt, once again, that he was being abandoned. In his narcissistic drug haze, he was unable to see that he was the one who had caused his marriage to disintegrate, and he believed that he was the victim.

He attempted suicide the day he was supposed to move out of the house. His wife found him when she got home from work, presumably dead.

"The only thing I remember is waking up in ICU in restraints," Brown said.

After that, he got clean, temporarily. He was still on prescription meds for his constant back pain, and he'd yet to hit bottom. The availability of the prescription drugs proved to be slippery ground.

A second chance

Talking to Brown now, it appears clear he takes responsibility for everything he's done, including his actions from that night in August, when he assaulted his wife and had the standoff with police. He embraces the message and goals of the WYSTAR program. Paramount among them is the ethos of personal accountability, and the creation and maintenance of an internal locus of control.

But is also obvious that on that warm night in August, the drugs themselves were at least partly to blame for his actions. Clonazepam, for example, has side effects that worsen when mixed with alcohol. He wasn't aware of them at the time, but they can include aggressiveness, loss of judgment and hallucinations. He'd also taken all of his methadone, hydrocodone, and morphine. And he'd been taking methamphetamine consistently for more than a year.

The combination was likely enough to cause a person to behave in ways they otherwise would not.

Which is why, now, he has been given a second chance. He is out of jail and out of treatment, and he's working one day at a time to reinvest his life with the dignity it once had. The man has been given the opportunity to become the outstanding citizen and caring husband he'd been before his downward spiral.

One of his responsibilities now, he believes, is to tell his story. He wants people to know that treatment is available for addicts -- treatment that he believes has turned his life around.

"If it just even helped one person, I'd be happy," he said. "I'm ashamed of what I've done, but not ashamed of where I've gotten."