“Now I can be myself and work with people in a totally transparent way.”

Walter

Sometimes, you are so sure of your destiny, it’s nearly impossible to change course—until you have no choice. Walter was raised in Portland, the youngest of six kids with caring parents. When he was bussed to a predominantly white elementary school, he coped with being one of just a few African Americans by becoming the class clown. Though he was a people pleaser, his antics often drew negative attention from his teachers. But everything changed when Walter entered Benson High School and started his incredible football career that led to a college national championship and a bid by the National Football League.

The football culture encouraged him to drink more and smoke a little pot—like some of his teammates. But as Walter’s identity and pride as an athlete grew, so did his substance use disorder. While playing football for the University of Washington, he sailed through three Rose Bowls—destined to be an NFL player. “I started to believe all the hype and allowed others’ opinions to define me,” Walter says.

His tipping point was when the team won the 1991 national college football championship and traveled to Washington D.C. to meet then-president George H.W. Bush. Walter was partying, blacked out, passed out and missed the visit with President Bush at the White House. Looking back, Walter admits “a storm was brewing.”

The next several years were a blur. Walter was signed to a free agent contract by the New York Giants but was cut after four months for failing a urine test. He kicked around the Canadian Football League for some years, but really thought he’d make it back to the NFL somehow. It wasn’t to be. “I didn’t know about addiction,” Walter says. “It got worse and I got depressed.” After a bad car wreck and years of drinking, he ended up back in Portland, living in an abandoned house and taking from his parents. In 2009, he checked in to Central City Concern’s (CCC) Hooper Detoxification Stabilization Center but started using again as soon as he left. By 2010, he had reached his lowest point. “The people I loved the most were the people I hurt the most.”

On April 28, 2010, Walter made a decision and called a childhood friend for help. He eventually entered inpatient treatment and was so relieved that he was sober when he saw his dying father who told him, “I got my baby back” just before he passed away. “I received the closure that my father was able to see me as the man I could be.”

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Walter’s life began to improve. He was able to take care of his mom while working on his sobriety. He began to understand the scientific basis of addiction and how different intervention strategies can help people recover from a seemingly hopeless disease. He worked as a counselor for three years putting that knowledge to work. In 2015, Walter started working as a peer mentor at CCC’s Imani Center, a culturally specific recovery program for African American clients. “My life began to change and got increasingly better every year. I switched from being an athlete to being a man with values and integrity.” Walter is open and honest about his past and uses that experience to help clients of the Imani Center though their recovery.

Now, Walter’s life revolves around his daughters, fiancée and family. He cooks, goes on walks and watches movies. His involvement with football these days involves rooting for the Huskies from his living room couch. He’s learned there is life after being a professional athlete. “The lights turned off and the cheering stopped,” Walter says. “I felt like I couldn’t do anything else so I turned to alcohol and drugs.” But in recovery, Walter found the authentic person inside.

“I can be myself and work with people in a totally transparent way,” he says. Sometimes when life seems to swerve off course, it’s just turning in the right direction.