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### From Prison to Purpose: A Patient's Story & Struggle with Addiction

Dr. Chapa:

Addiction can happen to anyone, no matter what their role in society is, and as healthcare providers, we play a critical role in screening and referring these patients to appropriate treatment so that they can have a second chance in life. But is it time for us to start looking at our patients struggling with addiction through a different lens?

Welcome to *Clinician's Roundtable* on ReachMD. I'm your host Dr. Hector Chapa, and joining me to share her journey through addiction and substance abuse is Mrs. Shay Walters. Shay has gone public with her personal story to help rescue those who are trapped under drug addiction. Shay, a very warm welcome to you.

Mrs. Walters:

Hi. Thank you guys so much for having me. It's going to be such a huge impact on my life, and I know on many others.

Dr. Chapa:

I could not agree any more. This is such an impactful thing that the United States and worldwide is struggling with, so I want to thank you again for your transparency.

So let's start right at the beginning of your story. At what age, Shay, did you become involved with substance use?

Mrs. Walters:

I started experimenting probably my freshman year in high school.

Dr. Chapa:

What was your substance of choice, and pretty young at freshman in high school, but what exactly were you using or experimenting with?

Mrs. Walters:

So at 15 I do know that I was drinking with friends on weekends. I remember smoking marijuana and I think pretty quickly I started dabbling with pills at a young age. I wasn't scared to try things. I never said no to anything that was offered to me.

Dr. Chapa:

And when you say pills, were these through friends or acquaintances, or how did you get, these substances? And what kind of pills are we talking about?

Mrs. Walters:

My freshman year, specifically, I remember trying Xanax. I remember a friend that had gotten into a wreck, actually someone that comes from a great family. She had gotten into a wreck, and she was having some PTSD out of it and they prescribed her Xanax, and she was a little bit older than me, and I remember her sharing those with me. And I also remember a childhood friend of mine, her stepfather was prescribed Xanax, and she would steal some from him and we would take them together.

Dr. Chapa:

Now I think that's so interesting because Xanax, of course, is so widely used in medicine for a variety of conditions. And obviously your thought process, I'm sure was not "Well how can I become dependent on this?" But when did you first notice that it went from use to more of a dependent kind of nature? Did you feel that move along that continuum? Or did it happen suddenly or slowly? Tell us a little bit about that path.

Mrs. Walters:

It was definitely slowly. The only memory I really have of something clicking that I might have a problem is I remember, which this was a couple years later so I was probably 17, I remember crying to my boyfriend at the time because he wouldn't find me any pain pills. And I think that was the first time that I realized that I was sick without them.

Dr. Chapa:

Wow, and I can relate to that because I have patients I think that are in that very situation and I'm not in mental health, of course, I'm an OB/GYN but it affects every discipline of medicine.

Now this happened in high school. When did things start really spinning out of control for you?

Mrs. Walters:

Around 18. So I had my son at 18 and I remember I abused a prescription that I was given after a C-section, and I was in an abusive relationship then, physically abusive my whole pregnancy, and I spiraled from there. That's when it started to get very bad, whenever I gave birth to my son.

Dr. Chapa:

I came across your story through a social media post, and you were very transparent in that, and we'll talk about that a little more. And I know this has been a very rough many years in the past and so I applaud you for coming through that. But tell us about when you think you hit your rock bottom? Or was there more than one rock bottom time?

Ms. Dunn:

Oh, I had many rock bottoms. I started to spiral really it was bad from 15 on, but at 18 I started really realizing that I was not just experimenting, that I was addicted, and that went on for another ten years before I hit my ultimate rock bottom. But throughout that ten years, I was in and out of jail multiple times. I would do thirty days or ninety days, and that wasn't my bottom. I had open CPS cases, that wasn't my bottom. And then it wasn't until I was facing a very long time in prison that I realized how bad my life truly was.

Dr. Chapa:

Wow. Incredible. And during this time, was your family supportive? Did you feel that they were there for you? Tell us a bit about that patient perspective that we just don't really hear from that often in healthcare.

Mrs. Walters:

Yeah, so my family loves me, I have a great family but my mom didn't realize that she was enabling me by protecting me and she would take my son and she would babysit him. I would leave for days at a time, and I think she thought that she was helping me. And then my sister, who is a college graduate, she's very intelligent, started researching what enabling meant. And so then she started coaching my mom about what is enabling and what isn't enabling. And they just got harder and harder on me with setting boundaries because they could've loved me right into the ground.

Dr. Chapa:

And again, I think that's something most people struggling with addiction can relate to because there really is a fine line between offering help and enabling, as you said.

Now I wanna bring us back a little bit more to my area, which is healthcare and healthcare providers. During this time when you were struggling, did you find, in any encounter for healthcare or from medical need, that healthcare providers were understanding of your situation? Or did you find them to be more or less judgmental?

Mrs. Walters:

I don't know if they truly were judgmental or understanding, but I had a perception of being judged. I don't remember being at a doctor's office or even a therapist's office and ever leaving feeling like they understood me. I feel like that's all across the board. Most of the time, anyone that struggles with any kind of addiction, whether they're being judged or not, they have a feeling of being judged and a feeling of being less than.

Dr. Chapa:

So that's more of an internal struggle. That's a mindset issue, wouldn't you say?

Mrs. Walters:

Yes. I have been in situations where people have been cruel and don't know how to handle the situation very well. But now that I'm healthy and I'm in a healthier mindset, I would say that it didn't truly have anything to do with external circumstances. I do feel like it was an internal thing.

Dr. Chapa:

Now during all this time, all of these years where you said you had multiple low points from open Child Protective Services cases to prison time, just to be very frank, very honest, did you ever feel like giving up or did you know that there was a way that you could beat this?

Mrs. Walters:

For the very longest time, I did want to give up. Actually, it kind of goes back on the question you just asked me, I do remember. I had multiple suicide attempts and there was a doctor in the psych ward that was extremely kind to me and very compassionate. And I've gotten to meet with him today, I've sat in that same room and talked to him because I help people where I'm from and I remember vividly remembering it felt like he genuinely cared. And there was a tech there as well that was extremely kind to me. And they do stick out in my journey. But I had multiple suicide attempts and multiple overdoses because I didn't think it would ever end in a good way. I thought that I would die an addict.

Dr. Chapa:

For everyone listening right now, I think that's a very impactful thing right there. And I tell my medical students that would be a clinical pearl right, something to take home from the discussion is that somebody's act of kindness that he may have just thought that he was doing his job, but that act of kindness of trying to understand where you come from, something that you remember. And I think that's very impactful for me, as a physician, to bear in mind at, three in the morning or four in the morning and there's a patient that the nurses have labeled or social work has labeled "a drug seeker" that no one is out of reach, wouldn't you agree?

Mrs. Walters:

I would absolutely agree. This wasn't necessarily a medical professional, but there was a corrections officer once, they had tased me, I was a very, very difficult young girl. I would get physical and they had tased me and I had blood on my shirt from where the prongs went through and I cried myself to sleep and when I woke up, that corrections officer had bleached and washed my shirt that was bloody.

And I remember it like it was yesterday because it meant so much to me. I felt like someone cared about me. I almost felt like my mom being there you know and caring about my clothes being cleaned and folded. And I remember that vividly to this day.

Dr. Chapa:

For those just tuning in, you're listening to *Clinician's Roundtable* on ReachMD. I'm Dr. Hector Chapa and I'm speaking with Mrs. Shay Walters about her story of addiction and substance abuse, and as we'll find out in just a minute, ultimately redemption.

Now Shay, earlier you addressed whether you experienced any feelings of hopelessness or feelings of giving up. Stemming from that, what can you tell us about your inner strength? I mean, where did that come from then and now?

Mrs. Walters:

Back then, I did not have much inner strength. I was diagnosed with many mental health issues as a young girl. I was very insecure, and I was very impulsive. So if I was having a feeling in my head, it was going to last forever. It was never going to get better. And only through, which I don't know how much the medical field looks into it, but my spiritual beliefs have I found strength to carry on when times aren't easy and when my emotions are getting the best of me I can find peace in the middle of a storm and bring myself out of it.

Dr. Chapa:

Excellent. Which brings us now to our next question and really what I think is now your calling and your passion. So what can you tell us, Shay, about "From Prison to Purpose?"

Mrs. Walters:

So 'From Prison to Purpose' started off with just I wanted to share my story. I have a heart for people that have been in the system. I think they're counted out a lot. You know, anyone that has a criminal history, felons, people getting out of prison, they're counted out a lot and I just genuinely wanted to share some hope, even if it was just to one person. I started it a couple years ago and it's just completely taken off, I have a half million followers on my Facebook page, I get judges that want me to come and speak, treatment facilities that want me to come and speak. And I think what it is is I genuinely have been the underdog. And I think for the most part people love to see a comeback. I think they want to see people succeed and I think if people know that they're not alone, I think we'll see more success stories.

Dr. Chapa:

I couldn't agree more. And again, what an encouragement. And as I mentioned before, this is something that sticks with you. When I was an intern, in my residency, I was guilty of doing what we're talking about. It was a very difficult patient, obviously on a substance, who was pregnant and I went back and gave my report, my checkout to my attending physician saying, "Oh, this is a drug user and you know not keeping her appointments," and the attending, this is now over twenty years ago and I have not forgotten it, things that stick

with you Shay, as you mentioned, is that physician said, "What if this was your sister? Or this was your wife? Or your mother? It's somebody's family member.", And just to remember that when you're talking to that patient. And so I think that's important for all of us to remember is that whether it's a difficult patient, mental health disorder, or substance abuse, Shay brings out a good point: there's a person behind a diagnosis and I think she's exemplified that very well.

Now before we wrap up, Shay, what would you tell others suffering from drug addiction? And at the same time, what would you tell their healthcare providers who are caring for them based upon your person experience and story?

Mrs. Walters:

So specifically to what you just said, if I could just add something, I know that you're an OB/GYN but my drug use was never a moral dilemma. I loved my child and I could not stop. I had lost the power to choose and to a normal person, that seems like it's just not realistic, like how can you not have the power to choose. I remember my sister being so sad she would be crying and she would have my son and I would just be so high and she would say, "Shay," and she would be crying and she would say, "Shay, why can't you just stop? You're killing us, you know, just stop." And I would be crying and I loved my sister and I would be saying, "I can't. Do you think I choose this? Do you think I want to be like this?" It is horrible to be the family member of someone that's using drugs and it's horrible to be the person using drugs, and I'm sure in the medical field, it's so tiring to see so many people suffering. But if you can just help one, those little things where you make someone feel special or like a person, you never know what seed you're planting. And it truly is a sickness and not a moral dilemma.

Dr. Chapa:

Yes, agreed. Well stated.

Well Shay, it's been a privilege to speak so openly and candidly with you about your journey. Thank you for your transparency. I hope that our listeners are inspired to not judge an addict and to view patients through a different lens, because as you have shown us, there is redemption possible and you can turn your life around and impact others in return. So I want to thank you, Shay, for not only joining me today, but for sharing your story.

Mrs. Walters:

Thank you so much. This has been such a blessing. You've been so kind and I think it's wonderful that you're interested in making a difference with this specific issue.

Dr. Chapa:

I'm Dr. Hector Chapa. To access this and other episodes in our series, visit [ReachMD.com/CliniciansRoundtable](https://ReachMD.com/CliniciansRoundtable), where you can be part of the knowledge. Thanks for listening.