

Sex, Drugs and Survival

A former prostitute on escaping sex trade and drug addiction

BY MEGAN PACELLA
info@thecontributor.org

Chelle Waller is an easy person to like. With a warm energy and a big smile, she invites me into the Thistle Farms office on a hot Thursday afternoon, and offers me a glass of water. As I set up my computer and microphone, we chat about work and the weather. If I didn't know better, I never would have imagined that just a few years ago, Chelle was addicted to crack, working as a prostitute to supply her addiction.

Fortunately, these days, Chelle is all sober and all smiles. But when she recently came across a photo of herself taken while she was addicted, she couldn't help but notice how deeply sad she used to look. "I hardly recognize that person," she says. But at the same time, she admits that she never really felt the pain so visible on her face in the photograph—it was numbed by the drugs and prostitution.

"That picture doesn't look like me. It's just sad," she says.

A self-professed "popular" girl in high school, Chelle is quick to communicate that she had a pleasant childhood—there was nothing about her upbringing that led her into the drug trade or the sex industry.

"I think as long as I had my dad, I was cool," she says. "I was really great. And my mom, she was a hard worker. She worked two jobs at a nightclub at night and [as] a housekeeper during the day."

Before she found herself caught up in that lifestyle, Chelle used to think that people arrived at a place of drug and sex addiction because of a difficult life experience.

"I thought for a person to use, something had to happen to them in their past," she says. "I thought, 'maybe somebody molested her when she was little.' I would be thinking, 'I know I'm not gonna get hooked on [drugs or prostitution], because I'm not going to let anything like that happen to me.' But there I was."

For Chelle, the progression was a slow one. It started when she experimented with marijuana in high school. A self-styled "fast" girl, she always ran with a popular crowd, and paired off with the most well-liked guys. After a while, she moved from smoking weed to trying cocaine. But none of that seemed to derail her path. When she graduated from a high school in Nashville, Chelle attended cosmetology school. She passed her classes and obtained her licensure, and started working in salons around town. With the goal of owning her own salon, Chelle and her grandfather started remodeling a house into a beauty shop of her very own.

"When we finished it, the codes [department] came and told me that it was in a residential neighborhood. I was just like, 'what?' I was doing hair off and on while I was building this business, and about a week later, I think somebody called and reported me for going against codes," she says. "I was in there fixing hair one day, and they came. I didn't know you had to be zoned to be a beauty shop. The shop I used to go to was in a lady's house. I knew I had to have a hair license and operating



Chelle. Photo by Raven Lintu

erate—Chelle started selling drugs to make ends meet. Although she was using cocaine pretty regularly, she didn't really think of herself as a drug addict. Before long she was making lots of cash, and she hired a doorman to keep her safe while she sold drugs out of her home. At the end of every night, she would pay him for his time by offering him free crack. One night, he tried to convince her that she could get a better high if she traded in the powder for a crack pipe.

"I'd seen those people faint when they smoked crack, and I knew it couldn't be no fun," she recalls. "I don't know why I did it, but he introduced me to the pipe, and that's when I started smoking crack. And everything went downhill from there. I forgot about the shop. I forgot about...everything."

Once Chelle started smoking crack, everything slipped away. About a month after her first hit, she woke up one day with no lights and no water in her apartment. She burned candles at night, so she could see enough to keep smoking. Before long, she lost her apartment altogether.

Spending most of her money on crack, Chelle started having a difficult time staying financially afloat. One day, she was sitting on a porch at a house in East Nashville when she noticed that girls would walk down the street and come back with enough money to buy drugs. They were making \$40 or \$50 at a time performing oral sex for men in the area. The idea of entering the sex trade scared Chelle, but within a few months she was

tt F.
Songwriter
@aol.com

t came
y
h more
ty
days
ng place
n both
d heart
months
years
noticed tears
u see
sed to be
t of her pain

former self
to hell
u can't tell
have fell
to hell

you see
et
me to meet
t know
lost soul
es
o this place
osed to do?
of God
ou
an
ng hand
ry?
k on by?

former self
to hell
u can't tell
have fell
to hell

takes
d brakes
e of their life
ve left
regret
y's
survive

former self
to hell
u can't tell
have fell
to hell

"It felt too low for me. I had never prostituted before. But one day, my money ran out, and I was like, 'Shoot, I'm gonna walk up the street,'" she recalls. "It didn't take five minutes, and I had \$40 or \$50. I thought 'I'll keep doing that.'"

For Chelle, the prostitution pushed her further into her drug habit.

"The prostitution mixes with the drugs, because you don't want to feel what you've just done. And the only thing that can numb you is the dope," she explains.

For years, Chelle was caught up in the vicious cycle: the more she prostituted, the more crack she smoked. And the more she smoked, the more money she needed.

Over time, Chelle says she developed a sort of sixth sense about which cars to enter and which to wave on. Sometimes as she approached a solicitor, she would get a sick feeling in her stomach. But when she needed a fix, she ignored her gut. Time and time again, she would find herself in dangerous situations. One night, she climbed into a car with a man dressed in a trench coat. He seemed nice at first, but as soon as he locked the doors, he snapped on her. He started beating on his steering wheel while he screamed at Chelle, threatening to hurt her.

"I seriously thought, 'this is it.' Luckily, I had the gift for gab, and I could tone people down. I talked that man down and escaped from his car. I said, 'I'm never gonna prostitute again.' But then when I needed a fix, I'd be right back at it."

Desperate for some cash, one night Chelle allowed a friend to hook her up with a truck driver who was willing to pay for sex. When she climbed into the truck, her friend sold her out, robbing the truck driver at gun point and leaving her to fend for herself. The angry driver thought she was in on the heist, and threatened to kill her on the spot.

"It took all of me to think of stuff to say [back to him], and things to do to him to scare him worse than he scared me," she explains. "I just turned it on him. I thought he'd kill me. Somehow I got out of that truck and all I can say is God is good."

After a while, Chelle wasn't even safe with her regulars. She had one customer who would visit her every Friday afternoon. One day, after he lost his job, he picked her up and drove her out to the country, where he raped her in the weeds and left her with no money.

"That's when the rapes and stuff started happening to me," she says. "It was in my addiction that it started happening to me a bunch of times."

During the 10 or 11 years that Chelle worked in the sex trade, she found herself close to death more than a few times. Some of her friends ended up murdered and abandoned in a lake near East Nashville. Somehow, she avoided

safe haven for women to break free from the drug abuse, prostitution and poverty that bind them to the streets. Chelle spent a three-year stint at Magdalene House, but it took her a while to give up prostitution.

"It was like an addiction to me," she explains. "I mean, I wasn't walking the streets prostituting, but I had people and I kept their numbers. I realized that it was a part of my addiction. I started going to therapy, and prostitution classes that reminded me that I was still degrading myself."

After those years spent living on the streets, Chelle was able to get a salon up and running, and start over with her three kids. But one morning, with no warning at all, she woke up feeling stressed out and in dire need of the drugs again.

This time, she didn't go back to crack, but she started snorting cocaine and smoking marijuana again. The relapse made her feel so guilty that Chelle stayed away from her friends at Magdalene.

"The only thing that kept me from coming back and getting clean wasn't that I couldn't stop using; it was the shame, and the guilt, and the embarrassment," she

remembers. "So many people had high dreams for me and believed I would never use again. I felt like I let them down—not even thinking about me. I stayed out selling drugs and had my kids living in that madness again. It was really bad. It was really painful."

Of all things, a house fire brought Chelle out of her addiction the second time. While she was living in the throes of relapse, her house caught on fire, and members of Magdalene House arrived on the scene before the Fire Department. For the first time, it occurred to Chelle that she hadn't been abandoned.

"Not that I wanted my house to burn up—but thank God it did!" she tells me. "I never would've gone back to Magdalene if they hadn't shown up when my house burned down."

She didn't return to the program right away, but a few months later, Chelle failed a drug test and the courts ordered her to return to the program. That was almost two years ago. Today, Chelle is working as an Administrative Assistant for Thistle Farms, a handmade bath and body product enterprise run by the women of Magdalene House. She has a close relationship with her mother and her kids, and she has plenty to smile about. The past is painful, but she's left it behind her.

"I am a survivor," she says. "I was doing something that people don't think you can snap out of, and here I am. I'm working, paying my bills. I'm clean. God puts you where you need to be. God is good. I'll say it again."

For more information on Magdalene House and Thistle Farms, visit: www.thistlefarms.org.

