



## PEOPLE

# TURN AND FACE THE STRANGE

BY LINDSAY STAFFORD MADER • PHOTOGRAPHY BY DUSTIN MEYER

**O**n a cool morning in April, Chef Philip Speer pulls up to Better Half Coffee & Cocktails, his motorcycle rumbling through the post-rush-hour quiet. After ordering a sparkling water, he sits on the patio under filtered sun and begins to talk about the incident in late 2014, and what came after. “I was very ashamed and very embarrassed,” Speer says, his arms and hands, beautifully tattooed, resting on the picnic table between us. “I lost everything...like, *literally* lost everything that I had.”

Speer is referring to the fall night he spent drinking heavily with industry friends followed by more drinks at a downtown bar. Around 2 a.m., he got in his car and was driving home when he veered off Cameron Road. His car hit a natural gas pipe, causing a leak, then flipped. This resulted in his fourth DWI. Austin news outlets showed footage of police finding him sleeping on the side of the road (after reportedly running from the scene), then responding to questions while handcuffed.

Before his highly publicized rock bottom, Speer had been at the top of his professional game as the culinary director for Uchi with four James Beard Award nominations. But he had also taken on a lifestyle of hard work, stress, events, travel—and lots of booze. “It started out being the life of the party and probably having a little too much here and there, to every time, and then my life was so out of balance as far as what my priorities were,” Speer says—noting that much of it had to do with ego. “It’s that badge of honor: I can go drink until four a.m. and still go to work at eight a.m. and do my job better than anyone else around me.”

While the previous three DWIs made Speer think he had “a luck problem,” the fourth meant reckoning with separating from his wife, Callie (chef-owner of Holy Roller), selling his house, losing his job and facing up to 10 years in prison. “With that last group of drinks I took,” he says, “I simultaneously disappointed everyone I know. So, nothing can compare to that. I knew that [my

oldest daughter] was in high school and people were watching that video, and I could only imagine how she felt. That honestly was the worst feeling.”

Speer entered rehab, where he learned something big: the science behind alcohol’s effect on brain chemicals that eventually leads a person to need increasing amounts to experience the same feelings of reward. This helped him drop the story he’d been telling himself that someday he’d be able to drink in moderation or perhaps just drink beer. “I can go months without drinking,” he says, “but when I drink, I drink to blackout. By the time I was finished [with rehab], I knew that I would choose to never drink again.” Speer quickly admits circumstances forced his hand to seek recovery—having known the court would eventually order him to do so. He also recognizes the privilege inherent in his ability to afford treatment and a good attorney, as well as his sentencing of 10 days in jail and seven years of probation.

“I don’t want to blame anyone but myself for decisions I made,” Speer continues—making it unflinchingly clear that he doesn’t fault the restaurant industry, which, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, has the highest rate of substance use disorder, almost double the average of all other professions. But the current industry culture also has some big trigger issues, such as the cultivation of intense, full-throttle chefs who make it look very cool to drink their way across Thailand. And, Speer says, it’s also simple things like shift beers, long and late hours and communal partying with your work family. “This is the romanticized part. You’re hanging out through the ‘war zone,’ and it’s hard and high stress and you get off work and you still have adrenaline running. And you [go] to the bar.” Speer spent two years doing consulting work and developing coping skills before returning to the atmosphere of full-time restaurant work.

Since the incident and finding sobriety, Speer has been focused

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Left to right: Ella, Philip, Callie and Lucia Speer.

on reducing the stigma of addiction and creating more supportive working environments. He also makes sure people feel like they can talk about their problems. Since the closing of Speer's and William Ball's coffee/food trailer, My Name is Joe, where they employed people in recovery and donated to a recovery center, the partners have set up The Joe Foundation to continue fundraising. And Speer says that whenever possible, he'll continue to employ people in recovery to help get them back on their feet.

Toward the end of our conversation, Speer talks about his new way of living—one he didn't know existed a few years ago. He forms work relationships over coffee or lunch—having realized “a conversation is just a conversation” and doesn't have to include cocktails at bars. If he's working and gets off late, he goes straight home and goes to sleep. He wakes up for breakfast with his 9-year-old daughter, which “helps more than anything.” He runs marathons and goes bouldering. He journals, he reads, he finds inspiration in nature. Since reconciling, he and Callie, who is also in recovery, like trying different restaurants. None of this is earth-shattering, until it is.

“It's not just all-work-all-the-time,” Speer says. “There has to be a balance. I'm absolutely still very passionate about cooking, but I'm now passionate about other things, as well. There are new things to try every single day. I mean, the old Austin was awesome; that's why I came here. But without evolution, it's death. It's stagnant, right? Growth is great.”