How a K9 Became the Turning Point in My Recovery

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Transcript

[00:04] appreciate you joining me today, man. I'm super honored to be here. This is this is quite the experience.

No, it's going to be cool, man. We're we're talking about what recovery can bring in life and it's great that we have an alumni here sitting with another alumni talking about what what can be possible in life in recovery,

right? So, we kind of want to highlight that, you know, what awesome things have come into your life since uh going through treatment. So, give us a brief introduction of of who you are and what you do here.

My name is Chris Pender. Um I am now a K9 trainer here at Warriors Heart assisting uh in the K9 program with the service dogs. Um it's just been a fantastic opportunity.

Yeah. Now, I I know you personally, you know, from well, like I said, we're both alumni, but I know a little bit of your backstory. Uh, without getting into too great a detail, I guess, tell us a little bit about your warrior background. You know, where you came from as far as your service is concerned.

Oh, man. So, I I grew up in a family of policemen. My grandpa was a a Denver cop. My uh dad was a Denver cop. My great uncle was a Denver cop. So it is it was just the like thing that I always um wanted to do when I when I grew up. Um and it it was it it and it was a journey. It was it was never easy. Um like I everything was everything I did was to do that. like, you know, I'd come out with these like outlandish ideas like I wanted to be a Navy Seal so I could be a Denver SWAT guy or wanted to go to LA so I'd be a better Denver cop. Um,

[01:42] and it really didn't really fold out that way. went to basic training for the United States Army and somewhere it was the one station unit training and I got found that I had like a ligament issue in my foot and they discharged me about 11 weeks into basic training

and it was kind of a bummer because I was really enjoying it. Um I didn't I didn't really realize how much I I was enjoying it was just a step to get somewhere else. Um, and I came home and I was like I I had all intentions of going back and life just kind of worked out the way it did and I ended up in a um college police academy in Colorado

and went to um got a job in Gran County that's uh infamous for the the Graanby bulldozer incident in June of 2004. And um

we could talk all day about that.

That's a story for another time, but it's more of He-Mier and the Kildozer, you know.

[02:47] Anyway,

yeah. No, that was that was uh we could we could definitely talk about that all day long. And

um

and then I went to the the Denver Police Academy. I got got hired on with Denver Police Academy. And I I really felt like, all right, this is it. this is I get to live up to my uh you know you know what my my impression was my father's expectations you know he always told me to be a doctor

something else um but

uh I just really wanted to follow in his footsteps I just I really admired him what a you know he's a Medal of Honor winner at the Denver Police Department and it was really cool because um he his uh badge number was 7573 and mine was 057 74. So I was like one shy of his 30 years later. So it was it still it gives me chills right now just thinking about how cool that experience was.

Oh, absolutely.

Um and I really found that like when when I became a policeman that we we finally had a way to connect and we were talking the same language growing up. Him and I didn't always agree on things because we weren't speaking the same language. Um, he was trying to be a good teacher, but my art his teaching style and my learning style didn't didn't mesh, but just really followed followed the uh the footsteps and and ended up in vice narcotics like he was, you know, he was a sergeant in the vice narcotics unit. And then I ended up getting getting detective training in the vice narcotics unit. went to a very variety of districts um within the city of Denver and and just had had a blast like um you know and and where I got hung was the politics and the the up the pressure from up top you know the job became not fun anymore.

[04:43] Yeah.

The pressures the um the we couldn't be safe anymore. Um, and it it took a toll like just, you know, just little little pieces um were taken away. I never I I didn't have a problem at work. I had a problem off duty and going home once once the uniform and everything came off. Then the bottle started opening, the the uh the boozing and the drinking.

Now, how long had you been a cop when that kind of started? Um it it kind of it really it got worse as it progressed throughout the um because you know how what my impression um was was there was alcohol involved with every police

um party, you know, and and we didn't we didn't hang out with too many uh civilians. It was typically a group of policemen somewhere and and we were typically out drinking somewhere in some um hole in the wall or where we could kind of be um to ourselves.

[05:50] Yeah.

And anywhere you knew you knew all the bartenders, you knew the probably the owners and and probably got cheaper drinks. Um

safe environment as well,

right? And it was safe. We could we were we were with each other. So, it just got worse and worse and worse and worse. And um in I want to say 20 about 2011 20 between 2011 2013 it starts getting really bad. Um I have my first panic attack and I was just we had this summer I just remember was just a little bit more brutal than typical. Um, and it was shooting after stabbing after shooting after stabbing. And I remember going into a gas station just to get a just to get a soda and maybe a can of dip and and um my chest came. I was waiting in line and my chest just imploded. Yeah. I remember getting to my police car and hitting my red button in my car, propping my door open and just waiting for cover um and yelling at I remember yelling at folks to get back um because they they knew something was wrong, too. Um and the paramedic comes in, they start putting nitro under my tongue. I'm like, "Oh, man. I know what that's for."

[07:13] Yeah.

You know, I'm having some kind of heart issue,

right? and and we get get through everything and and they they say it's I had a panic attack. Um and you know they were they gave me like Lorazzipam and and I'm popping these things like Tic Tac. So I'm reading the bottle one day. I'm like oh I probably shouldn't be driving you know taking these things. So they switched me to something else but um the thing that worked the best was alcohol. it just was the go-to

to relieve that um

those panic attacks and anxiety and I was constantly under this weight of not necessarily that I was in trouble but I always felt like I was in trouble or I was I had some kind of pressure on me

like they were looking at you a little too closely right

step out of line in the slightest and you're done

right and it did and and like I had you know called in to go out with um to a St. Patrick's Day event. I called in, you know, I'm like, I'm sick, right? And of course, like, you know, somebody in roll call somewhere was like, oh yeah, he's real sick. You know, so that's when social media was really starting to, you know, ramp up. And I had just forgot to like tell somebody no pictures. Um, I've

[08:33] been there myself and it, you know, um, and I sergeant pulls me in and and I and I knew like he knew the answers to the questions he was answer asking and I just Yeah. I'm like, you know, I got an issue like something, you know, I got anxiety this and, you know, all these things that it hurts. So, I end up um end up in a rehab facility. They put me on did some FMLA and got

in. Um I also had to do a suspension for um you know related offduty incident and they kind of combined everything and and I went to this this you know just a typical rehabilitation center. You know they talked about the 12 steps and um was probably on board for 30 days after and then we just fell off. It just

Now, was that why you were a law enforcement officer? So, you took leave and

Yeah.

Yeah. Yeah.

Okay.

Um and really just struggled, you know, after that all the way through.

[09:38] Um, you know, I was hiding my drinking. I was like, "All right, I just want to get caught. I'll drink at home,

you know, I'll drink where people, you know, aren't going to see me." Um,

and, you know, and eventually it caught up. you know, went out with a group of buddies and um and you know, I was literally like I remember driving home and seeing Triple and I was like, "Yeah, this ain't good. I better get off the road." So, I pull back into this neighborhood and um and I ended up getting a getting a DUI um while sleeping in my car. And you know, at first I was, you know, upset at the officer, you know, like why, you know, come on, man. Um, let's help each other out, like, you know, and and it's he probably unknowingly provided me the start of the greatest gift that I was ever to receive. Um, I just didn't know it yet. You know,

[10:39] you can't see it in that moment, but you know, he wouldn't have done you any favors had you said had he said, "All right, just go on home or call somebody."

You think? You know,

right. No, I would have just I would have been in the back of some other officer's car eventually.

Eventually.

And it could have been a worse situation,

right?

Yeah.

Yeah. Um, so, um, you know, I I end up, you know, I the case gets through, you know, I lose my license and I end up doing 10 days in jail, which was, you know, miserable for, you know, here I am. I was a policeman. Like, I put people here and I'm in jail and it was very humbling. um they did do me a favor and put me in solitary for um the 10 days that I was there and they treated me well and things like that, but I remembered the the red cup and the rubber spoon that they gave me and I never wanted to drink out of red rubber cup and a and have the have the spoon again. You know what I mean? And

[11:40] I was like that was enough. Um but it wasn't enough. It was just get smarter about your drinking. You know, as time goes, you I land another law enforcement job, but I'm miserable. I'm angry at everything.

I don't know what's um I don't know what's wrong.

Um you know, I get in I'd find these like spurts of relief through like exercise. Um you know, reading a lot about the special operations community. I think about that time that movie Lone Survivor had come out. Um I got to have some words with um uh Danny Deetsz's father um at a bar. But you know, we you know, he shared some things and and it and I was finding a little bit of hope. A little bit, not a lot, but you know, I continued to drink and I was like, "Okay, maybe I need a lot like a you know, I'm going to move." my um my grandpa had built this beautiful log house down in southwest Colorado and we we took off down I I took off down there. I was like, you know what, I'll help my grandma. Um you know um I won't drink as much.

[12:55] Change of scenery.

Yeah. Right. Um restart.

Mhm.

And what I found is I I gradually ended up in the same miserable hole because I I didn't have anything to do. I didn't have any electives. There was no there's not a whole lot in small towns. It's hard. Um

well, you hadn't dealt with what was going on in here, right? And in here,

right?

So, that just follows you wherever you go. I mean, that's the saying, wherever you go, there you are, right? Until you turn around and deal with it,

right?

It just kept getting worse then.

Mhm.

And it just it was getting worse and worse and worse. Um it seemed like everybody I knew around me was getting a DUI. Um and like the the number of drivers was kind of running out.

Yeah.

And I and my um you know my my drinking buddy, my aunt, you know, ends up, you know, in some legal issues and then she she has some health issues related to alcohol. I'm like, man, enough is enough, you know. Um, and a friend had heard of, you know, Warriors Heart and you know, she didn't know me anything, you know, she but I I for whatever reason reached out to her. I'm like, I need some help. I need like I was grasping everything.

[14:18] Was there a specific breaking point, specific incident, or just a culmination of all those things and just not liking where life was? I I think I the the triggering event was was my aunt getting in some legal issues and then being diagnosed with these health issues that were um appeared to be alcohol

related, right?

And I and I saw the ground coming up so fast.

Um and I knew I had to pull the rip cord and and and bail. Um, and and it was, you know, I I probably called everybody I knew. Um, I told them, "Oh, I'm going to treatment." I found this place in Texas. And the problem was just getting in there because I like I didn't have a um I wasn't making money from a job that would that had health insurance or anything like that. Um I

No VA benefits, right?

No VA benefits.

[15:18] You only for Yeah. I got you.

So, I'm talking to the gal on the phone and and she's like, "Well, maybe we can get you in on a scholarship, you know, and and and I remember getting the paperwork and just making sure I, you know, wrote down everything like every reason like I needed this because like I I was like, "God, this is my only hope. This is like I I wasn't going to another rehab that that um was just for civilians." Like, I refused.

You've done that before. Yeah. you know, I'm like, "That ain't going to work." And and I and this place better not be a 12step program, you know, and I remember talking to the gal on the phone and um I'm like, "Is this a 12step program?" And she's she's like, "Yeah, well, you got veterans and first responders, though, right?" And and she said, "Yeah." I was like, "All right." You know, I'm like, "All right, I'll concede that to to get to get that." And it you unbeknownst to it was like the best decision you know kind of looking back now it's God I'm I'm so glad that this place was here.

[16:27] What was your resistance to the 12 steps at that point? I mean we all have our reasons initially you know mine I was at war with God. I saw God in the 12 steps and I just I couldn't bite on it at that moment but it was just an indicator that I wasn't ready. What was it for you? Um, you know, it for me it wasn't it wasn't so much the God thing because, you know, my ego was so big. I believe God sent me to every radio call that I went to. I'm like, you're so lucky I'm here. Um, you know, and then that's where my but it was the being vulnerable with like I got to get a sponsor. Yeah. I gota I gotta tell you my and at the time I believe like you know you're you're gonna pick apart my problems like a therapist and tell me how to correct myself and and who are you to like tell me what like I'm the police I was the police you're not you know like

people called us when they were in trouble. We went and saw everybody else's issues now I got to tell you all my issues and you're going to fix me

[17:30] right.

Yeah that's that's a hard reality check for guys like us.

Yeah it it it really it really was. And you know, I was like, I can do this by myself. I I can read. Um I can follow directions. I can do this by myself,

you know. And

um

how'd that work out for you?

Yeah. 30 days later, you know, um

you know, and it it it just it didn't work. And and it ended up and it ended up me was in the back of a police car, you know, about a year later. it. Um, and I knew AA was there. Uh, I didn't know WA was there, but um, you know, and I just I just I was like something somewhere, you know, eventually it'll break and I'll just quit on my own. You know, I'll get so sick of this that I'll uh And it's it's kind of funny because the the year that I came to Warrior's Heart, my New Year's resolution was to quit drinking. And it's probably the only New Year's resolution I've ever met, which was which was which was cool. Um, but I remember being um getting the phone call. I get the the calls back. Um, yeah, you're coming um this was in May and you're like, "All right, your day

[18:53] of which year?"

Of 22.

May of 22. Gotcha.

May of 22. And but you're we can't get you in until July. Mhm.

I'm like, "All right, we could probably I was like, "All right, now I'm on a mission. I'm going to be the most soberest person that rehab, you know, and and so I I I not my dad and I were able to keep myself busy enough for for 30 days and and um I went up to Denver and we were ready and we were waiting and then I had to go get something at my grandma's and I'm like, I'll be all right." and showed up down at um back at my grandma's in southwest Colorado and a friend shows up in a Jeep wanted to go to Moab with a you know a handle of booze and I'm like all right one more right

one more hurrah before I go in

one more hurrah before I go and and I I chuckle about this now but I remember like telling him to stop the car real quick and I ran back inside and I grabbed my impact wrench and everything to change tires cuz we were going to Moab and I'm like there's alcohol involved. Someone's going to get a flat and we're going to be out in the middle of nowhere.

[20:08] Yeah.

And we we ended up having to use that. But but that's that's that unmanageability of like you know I mean who who prepares for drunken episodes like you know alcohol involved episodes like you know you're bringing extra tools and looking back at it to me it was just being prepared. Now it it just illustrates my uh unmanageability.

Yeah. Different kind of checklist. You didn't bring water, didn't bring first aid supplies, you know, you just brought tools to fix a truck when you break it because you know you're going to break it because you're drunk.

Right.

Right. I ended up I got I got myself got myself back to Denver and and I I was like, "Well, I don't want to go to detox because I have to use every

every day has to count. Like it has to count." um because I only get 42. My dad gave me a uh it's kind of a I don't know if it was more punishment than reward, but he he bought me a first class one way first class ticket, you know, and you know, of course, in first class it's you can have all the alcohol you want.

[21:18] True. And I I resisted the urge, but I'm like, gosh, man. Like, I could have like, you know, drank and, you know, I wish this was a different flight. You know, the flight was for a different reason, but um, you know, I wanted to make my my dad proud and I

I definitely wanted to um let you know, whoever funded me, the foundation that funded me know that I meant meant business, you know. So, I sure, you know, resisted that urge. Um, and stopped and grabbed my Starbucks on the, you know, it was right at the gate. It was perfect. I was like, great, right on. I get my Starbucks and and the the Warriors Hard driver was outside like kept calling and calling. I'm like, I'm lit. I promise you I'm in the line of Starbucks. Like, I'm not at the bar. I'm not I'm um I'm here. So, um, met up with him and and I I remember the ride in, um, and remember being like extremely scared. Um, the the driver was was very like excited about recovery and it was I'm like, "Oh man, like what am I doing?" Like like I remember every every good decision I've ever made at the beginning, the very first day, you know, basic training, I remember saying, "What the did I do to myself?" You know what I mean? Because I signed up for this. I remember the first day of the Denver Police Academy. I'm like, "What the did I do to myself?" Like um they're yelling at me and doing all these things. And I remember saying that when when um driver picked me up.

[23:10] I'm like, "God, what is it?" I mean, because it and and then when I got through and the first thing that someone tells me is, "Welcome home."

Yeah.

I'm like, "Well, this isn't like I I was half expecting, you know, everybody to be standing out in the field, you know, holding hands, singing kumbaya and and and and it wasn't that." I was like, "Oh, cool. All right." And I remember going into intake and this uh there's a marine in there and he he he told me he's like, "Yeah, I plotted all the the exit routes and you know, I had scoped the area while we were waiting for you." And and I was like, "Oh, you're waiting for me." I was like, "Oh, man." You know, um I was like, "Cool. Well, if anything bad happens, I'm following you." You know, and he he was a character, man. He made me laugh so hard while I was here. Um, but I remember like my blood pressure was through the roof. Medical was like, "What do we do with this guy?" I'm like, "Please don't send me to the hospital." Like, you know, um, I didn't I didn't know that I'd get to come back if I went to the hospital. I thought it was I thought they were going to, you know,

[24:23] um, kick me out for medical reasons and and then I'd be back to square one, you know, here on a one-way ticket. Like,

sure. Um, I'm sure it would have would have worked out, but you know, we go through these start working through the program and and everybody keeps telling me, "Welcome home." And like it was just you're like, "No, there's there's there's snacks in the fridge. There's ice cream over here. There's, you know, drink."

Yeah. Um, I got to meet Sue and Andy and and man, just like they were just made me laugh. But I remember being so anxious like I could hear every knife hit every plate. I could hear the talk the every conversation in the chow hall and just being completely like miserable for those first couple days, you know? So they they pulled me back into uh detox just to kind of check out my blood pressure and and they got that under control and the anxiety and and it it started to wayne, you know, day by day by day. So let me ask you this or let me point out something real quick. You know, those first day jitters that you talked about, you know, the police academy boot camp and then coming here, you know, that's something that we talk a lot about. You know, when I was in admissions, we talked to guys about that on the phone a lot. you know that that nervousness, that feeling like you want to run.

[25:41] The hardest things that we've done in life have brought us to the most beautiful places in some ways or another, you know, with the academy or with basic training or whatnot.

They were the right direction, but initially we felt like we need to run from this.

And when we're in that state, when we're in that self-destructive state, that voice is loud, right? It's loud telling us we got to run from this. This isn't the right way to go. But if we can make it through that, it brings us to the most beautiful places. You know, it's the voice that you got to listen to inside your head. The still quiet voice as the Bible says or that loud voice that's springing in your head saying, "No, you got to run from this."

Facing down those demons and getting in is the most important part. Now that you're here, right now in your story, now that you're here, what was the aha moment for you? What when did it start to click? Now you you know we want to get really deep into you know the good things that happen but we got to set the stage. Right. Right. So what was it that clicked while you're in treatment?

Oh man. So I'm I'm here and this guy we were we were over at the refrigerator and um he's like you like dogs. Like yeah everybody likes you know dogs you know. I had read in the on the on the um online page that you know there's a K9 program. And I didn't really know what it was. It just um I kind of figured, you know, it was like swim with the dolphins kind of thing, you know, go down there and and learn about, you know, service dogs or maybe they had a dog down there and, you know, and and I'm I'm so insecure with myself that like I wasn't going to go. I was like going to leave it alone. And um he's like, "No, it's like a whole program. Like you can adopt a dog." I'm like, "What? No."

[27:25] I was like, "You got to be kidding." You didn't read that part in the brochure, did you?

No, I didn't. I did. I didn't read that. And so I I went over to I remember going into CR and and signing up for the orientation and and getting in like the next day. And I go down there and I remember I still remember who did my orientation. I remember meeting uh Cash for the first time and feeling like so at home because of the personality of the K9 staff. It was like so like yeah, we're going to come in and and so and I and I kind of like, all right, well, I got a dog at home, so maybe I'll I'll take everything I can and and work with my dog at home and and that'll give me something to do. And the more like it time went on, I I there was like one dog I saw and

I'm like, "Oh, I'm going to adopt that dog." And then so I start working with that dog and then somebody puts an application in for it, you know?

[28:26] But I I and then um see another dog and then here I am and and all of a sudden I'm like, you know what? I need to advocate for myself. And so and and that was like my aha moment like I need to advocate for for Chris like Chris needs to like you know um go and do these do these things and start learning.

You got to start fighting for yourself instead of tearing yourself down,

right? And um so I ended up ended up with I found Hood. She came in and I remember like going into the kennel. I probably broke every kennel rule, like quarantine rule and everything. And I'm in there with her. I'm like, "This one's mine." Just so it's known. This one's mine, you know. So, um, and it was cool because everybody start, you know, they're laughing. I'm feeding the dog cheese. I'm like, "See, she likes me, you Um, and and I'm like, "All right, now I have now I have something to like work towards, you know, because there was like um I knew I probably had to I was since I had to apply. It wasn't over, right? You don't just pay for the dog and and it's yours,

[29:46] right? There's a whole process involved,

right? And so I had to do all the all the other things, too. Make sure I was in group. um you know participate and but at the other end there was this prize and you know do my um step work and give it a give it a go at least give it a go. Um and my counselor at the time gave me kind of gave me a book to run parallel with the big book so I could have something to because I couldn't understand the words. Um, I I would try to read at night and I would get to page five and fall asleep. Um, and so we started working with that, but I actually I but I remember being like, listen, this is what's actually happening. Um, I'm trying to read and then I'm falling asleep and I'm not getting anything out of like

and I'm I'm hurting myself. So, um, and and finding and then and then having her be like, you know what, maybe you need a little bit of like something to associate things with. And I begin to start associating recovery to things that I already knew. Um, you know, like powerlessness, you know, guy in a bulldozer and all you got is a shotgun. I mean, that's pretty powerless. Um and and but being able to move, you know, move through that and keep going, keep moving forward. And and but I remember too where um I I thought I had to take it all in at once because I had 42 days. Um and it wasn't that because every other, you know, the military being a police officer, you had to get it, you know. Um, somebody could get hurt or or killed if you didn't get it.

[31:44] Yeah.

Um, you know, and coming out of the academy day, you know, there's stories everywhere of, you know, day one, you know, rookie cop getting shot. So, um, same thing here. This was life or death. And I got to get this. And luckily the the folks here were able to like um kind of slow me slow me down and and take steps day at a time. Take the take the journey one day literally one day at a time. And I remember, you know, hearing guys like, I only got I only got 12 days left. I only got this, you know, and I'm I'm like, I still got I still got uh 30 days. I still got um and really

changing my my um the words in my head like to where like I you know, I get to go home and spend time with my family now. I get to come here and have this interview with you.

[32:48] It's that important perspective shift of from I have to to I get to, right? Yeah.

You know, and until later on, you know, it's like everything is to get to.

I only get today.

Um I'm only guaranteed right now this moment. And and to take advantage of all that. And so, um, you know, we go through the program, I get my get my coin out and and I I look up and there's like all these guys there like saying all these, you know, nice things. Of course, I'm embarrassed. I'm like, "Oh, shucks, guys." You know? Um, but I, you know, I I I have my coin in my pocket right now. And, and that's that thing that like bonds us all together is every every one of us when we complete the program, we hit that coin.

And it it is it's kind of like that head nod, you know? Um, or when you see someone wearing the shirt, you know, you're like, "Yeah, I know.

It's hard earned." Yeah. Mhm. And it's so cool.

[33:51] Did you go to Sober Living after you left?

Yeah. Um I I I wanted to um buy an RV and live behind K9 by that tree out there. Um

own property.

Own property.

Yeah, I got you.

I was like, yeah. I was like, I got my dog, sober environment, bunch of warriors, you know. I was like, I'll volunteer or something, you know, and they were like, no, but uh why don't you try, you know, why don't you think about sober living? and and here I am a place I'm like no but you guys have given me so much I was like I don't have I don't have a ton of money like I could probably scrape together a little bit um and you know the foundation came through for me again and I was like man I really owe it to them to give everything my best go you know so I'm doing IOP I'm doing sober living um making sure like I was like all right there's one rule that I have to you know every day is just don't drink. Don't bring, you know, don't bring um that here, you know. Um and and it kept me sober, you know, just that one, you know, sober living. I have to live sober.

[35:01] Well, you were also working the program, going to the meetings, working with sponsor,

everything that's required,

right? Yeah. And I I remember, you know, the at the beginning like finding a sp I was like, "Okay, I got to find a sponsor." Um, and I found this uh found this guy. He's got like, you know, 40 years of sobriety. You know, my sponsor is more sober than your SP, you know, kind of thing. And it was kind of silly,

but he knew a lot about AA and the program and was able to like communicate a lot of great things to me and even communicate to where you know what, maybe I need a sponsor a little closer. Um, so I started talking to the guys I had been watching, you know, that were um, really

look like they're I mean, there was a guy that trained his dog to ride a skateboard with him and would just like chill by the pool and and he looked like um he was like free and he p, you know, and and he was he was like just happy

just happy. And so I luckily he had a dog so we would go on walks in the morning and I started talking to him about hey who would be a good good sponsor and he he pointed me in a good direction and I started working with that sponsor and and now I feel like I'm a part like it was so weird. I like yeah I got a sponsor and I'm I'm doing the deal. like he was giving me homework to do and and uh I was doing it and then um and I I did my mer and that finished up and um and I it was kind of bummer because like the first sponsor we did one, two, and three and then I switched and then we did one, two, and three again. So, I'm like, gosh, man. I'm like 1, two, and three, and and and then sober living um that my time there uh had had expired, and I needed to um go back home. And so, I was like, "Oh boy, what am I going to do?" I was like, "Well, I'm going to take Warriors Heart with me, you know? Um I'm going to get a sponsor as soon as I get there. I'm going to have electives. I'm going to find a counselor. And that's what I did. I went home and the program followed me. And amazingly, it worked there, too. I was like, "Wow, it works here in Colorado, too."

[37:20] Oh, go figure.

You know, weird,

weird.

Um, and it was like, heck yeah. And I got this sponsor that's kind of like the one I had, a little older. Um, but you know, we start working through and now I'm like five months, you know, five, six or like I went home with six months of sobriety. Now I'm like 11, 12, about ready to to to get a year and like some job opportunities back here start popping up and home didn't quite feel like home anymore. family was still family, but I was changing and the things around me weren't, you know. Um, and I and I felt like the my time there was was done. And um, you know, did did some talking with the family, some praying, and I was like, you know what? I'm gonna go back to sober living. So, I saved up some money, got a couple months, and went back to sober living. And I was like, I can move back there and find, you know, find a job and then, you know, maybe I can find a place to, you know, place to get out on my own. Kind of that next step thing.

[38:36] Mhm.

And it was cool cuz it it was kind of funny cuz I I I come be boopping through the door and and you know, folks are like, "What happened?" I'm like, "What do you mean?" Like I'm like, "I'm good." They expect there to be a relapse, you know, something horrendous,

you know. I'm like, "No, I don't know. I just moving back. I missed y'all, you know. Um, this is home, you know. Y'all told me welcome home." Well, guess what?

You got always come home, right?

Right. And I missed the coffee, you know. And so, yeah, I I get back and I start looking and some of the job officers fell through. Right. Mhm.

So that that shift of um I'm like, "All right, well, let's try keep, you know, keep working." And I found a um I knew I wanted to come back to Warrior's Heart. I I had uh talked to Cash at one point while I was here, and I was like, "Hey, can I come back here and work?" She's like, "Yeah, I'll get your two years um and you can come back." And so I I held her to that, you know. I was like, "All right, I'm gonna I'm gonna come back. That's going to be my thing." So, while I was at Sober Living the second time, I'm like, "Okay, so I have to do things to put myself in a position to work there. What do I need to do?" Um, and I I was like, "Well, I maybe get some experience working in a re a rehabilitation center or a mental health facility or, you know, some something along those lines." So, um, I went and got a got a job at another facility working jobs similar to our our client relations here and they had a veteran first responder program. So, I I uh gradually kind of positioned myself and got myself where I was over with them. It wasn't like I was assigned, but it it was enough to uh just hang out with the folks and that.

[40:32] Yeah. and and and I and I enjoyed it. I enjoyed being around um the vets and first responders that just needed, you know, maybe a positive words or or just a vision of hope of like, you know, about that time, you know, I'm I'm a year plus sobriety and and and that's obtainable to them, you know. They're like, "Oh, yeah. How's it?" You know, "Oh, really? You got a year and you're back here and and life's good and and and And it would felt good to be like, "Yeah, you can you can do." and and um so like I work through that about my two years is coming up and um and so I applied for you know Warriors Heart and and it's it was it was cool and it was it was like but like I I'd forgotten about like IOP so I you know I got I had to like a little bit hang up there so I had to wait a little bit extra long a little bit and then

[41:33] and then um I could I was like, "All right, well, I can I can shoot, I've done two years."

Yeah.

You know what I mean? I can do two months.

And that was about the time that I met you, I think. You know, at at the local AA meeting. You know, what happens in the meeting? We're supposed to, you know, not talk about it, but still, we're going to talk about it a little bit if you don't mind. That's about the time that I met you. You were working at Starlight

and you know, kind of like you were talking about that that rookie, right? you don't know what you're doing. But at this point, you got a year sobriety, a little bit more as you're working the program, and you kind of become that beacon of hope for the guys that are in that other program over there, the vets and first responders. So, you're able to pay it forward

and be a guiding light for them while you're still finding your path, which was huge. And that was about the time I met you was in the meetings, and I remember a story that you told about getting run over in the Tractor Supply parking lot. And it struck me, I I don't know if you want to tell that story, but it struck me because of the way that you put it, right? The old you, what you would have done versus the way that you handled it.

[42:37] And the amazing conversation that came out of that, right,

you know?

Yeah. It was uh Yeah. I was I was over Tractor Supply. One of the things I love to do is um

take my dog and give her a bath because it was just it was one of those activities. It takes about an hour. Um, and it it would get me kind of I'd put on my uh AirPods and and just listen some music, watch the dog, and watch her get the zooies afterwards. But um I'm loading her up in the back of my car and I I I see this, you know, out of the corner of my eye, I see this person backing into me and all of a sudden the bumper starts crushing my the backs of my legs and I'm like, you know, elbow in the tailgate and the car pulls forward and and I'm, you know, I got that adrenaline pump and I'm a little bit irritated. And I I remember turning around and and the gals getting out of the car and what I wanted to say is, "What the hell were you thinking?" But what came out of my mouth is, "Are you okay?" And it was astonishing. You know, um, and you know, she starts apologizing. She's like, "My husband just died. I'm just not in the right headsp space." Like, you know, and I and I realize like I'm all right. like, well, I can walk it off. You know, like my mom says, rub dirt on it.

[44:06] Um, and we ended up, you know, talking and, you know, we talked for a couple weeks. She she uh checked on me, make sure I wasn't, you know, super injured, but um and being able to offer, you know, to her um you know, hey, if you need anything, just give me a call.

Yeah.

And um you need something moved or whatever, just you got my number. So it's there and then you know I haven't heard from her since but it was it's it was always out there

but still it was a response rather than reaction her old self our reaction would have been to yell scream cuss threat to sue you know whatever maybe get into a fight

but space right you have a little bit of space and then respond right

and you had a good conversation good interaction with that person right which is one of the things I remember from you

you know and that comes from treatment it comes from training you know we refer to this place as training rather than treatment you know because it's it's our academy and then I know you will get this but you know from a law enforcement standpoint when we exit the academy that's when the real work starts the meetings that's our range the sponsors our FTO that big book is our field training manual right

[45:17] and that's what gets you to that point

now moving forward in your story I mean you're right at the cusp of of coming to work here

so you get hired

let's take it from there you get hired you start working in the K9 immediately Uh yeah. So that was the that was the job I applied for was uh the kennel care.

Mhm.

Um and and and I was like, man, I remember I remember walking in my first day and Cash is smiling and I'm smiling and then you know it's like, okay, now what? Right? Like kind of like when I got my badge and I remember getting the phone call of like we're going to hire you. It

was like I got the same feeling that I got when I got that letter from the, you know, Denver Police Department. I was like, "Congratulations, you know, you're gonna be in part of this class." And I had that same feeling. I'm like, "All right,

start of a new adventure,

right?" And the work starts and I remember like, "All right, I'm going to be the best Kennoare tech I can be." You know, I'm not I'm not here to compete with anybody. I'm just going to

[46:26] um do my job and do it well and doing to just to the best of my ability. You know, if I got if I got 80%, you know, if I'm, you know, not feeling good and I'm not, you know, 100% but I'm 80%, I'm going to give 100% of that 80%. Whatever I got. And and it just it it it's been an amazing amazing journey. And you know, I get to connect with so many folks that were were, you know, like I I'd see people that like I'm like, "Dude, I'm I'm you two years later. I'm you three years later."

You can connect with that real personal experience. I've been there. I've done that, right? Here's how to get through it.

Right. And uh I remember telling um a warrior I'm like, "Man, you got to advocate because um uh if if that's the dog you want, then you got to advocate for it. You got to show up. Got to fight,

you know." And that was something I had to learn because uh the dog I wanted kept walking out the door, you know,

[47:30] with which was which was um which was great. But and and watching them graduate, you know, through the, you know, complete through the program and then going from like never having a dog sit to doing their completing a first sit to tasking with the dog and then, you know, through the program, you know, sit to um they walk, you know, few steps away and the dog's just sitting there and they're doing all these things and seeing the light bulbs like illuminate and and it's so much fun. And then high-fiving and and sitting down on Sundays. Sundays was one of my favorite days because it's grooming day. You know, we don't don't do a whole lot of like physical training. Folks can work on their skills, but we we get to connect because everybody's sitting around in a big circle and we're brushing out our dogs and and talking about, you know, whatever anybody wanted to talk about. Yeah. And it it's it's like the canine fireside, you know. Um it's a lot of fun.

[48:36] And that confidence booster of being able to train a dog and get the dog to do what you want. I remember those aha moments for me in K9 when Cash was showing me a few things with Baby. And I was overjoyed. I was happy. I felt like, you know, I was heading in the right direction again finally. And you get to be a part of that. Let me ask this though. Your personal life, it was coming up in a big way around that same time as well, right? And oh man, it like um my wife now I met met my wife and and then you know we got married and it was like okay now what you know and and I didn't know how to be a husband. I've never been a you know husband

never been married before.

No I I was married real briefly

um back when I was a policeman but I wouldn't call that a a marriage. Um, it just, you know, personality complex and we I got out got out of there fairly fast. But

[49:36] th this was like I'm like this is like real, you know, and and we're we're like battling through this first year of marriage. Like it's it's it's hard. I'm like, geez, is there a book like how to be married? You know, like

is there a training manual for that?

Right. like and because I have my way of thinking, she has her way of thinking and like somehow we have to find this blend this

this um you know the the teaching style and the the learning style, right? and we're both doing both. and and we find this this class at our church and I started I remember I remember we're sitting in group uh and it's I'm like well there's step one there's step two there's three four you know

you see the 12 steps of AA and we're in this marriage class and I'm kind of laughing and and I remember saying in the group you know welcome to AA you know cuz they they everybody I was able to I'm able to be vulnerable with my group and be like Because because if there might be somebody sitting in that group that you know you know has was feeling the way I was too like I just got to quit drinking.

[50:47] You know my marriage is falling apart. That's why we're here in this class.

And we were the only couple that had less than like five years of marriage, you know. So, we we were newly weds in this class and and now we're learning to how to talk and and now our marriage has become more of a dance than um this contractual relationship of well, I'll I'll do the dishes if you you know, change the baby. Now, it's you know, we're doing the dishes and changing the baby. And um

and you got a baby in the mix.

Yeah. Oh, yeah. And then he's a year a year old today, you know.

Today's his birthday.

Today's his birthday.

Oh, wow.

Um,

happy birthday to him.

Yeah, Thomas. Um,

and that's your first child.

He's he's my first boy shot, but I also have a um stepson and he's my son. Like he's he's my like um I'm not giving him back

because he he he's my training aid and he's been there like he has he has like taught me so much about myself. How old is he?

[51:52] Uh he's eight.

Eight.

Yeah.

Oh wow.

Or he'll be eight this March. Like I just I didn't know how out of like how being alone for so long and you know um or being single for so long that like you get stuck in your ways and you're like you know what this is how I'm going to um and Wyatt had like a different he's like no here's how you're going to be a dad. like and being able to take that suggestion, you know, to an extent

of be like, "All right, maybe I need to change my my attitude or my perception of how he's learning, you know, may maybe I'm being too much like my dad." And and but being able to recognize that and and our relation my my relationship with Wyatt now is like starting to really flourish and and we're having fun and we're like, "Hey, let's go get some ice cream. won't tell nobody, you know, like and and really have some cool moments, you know. He he he asked the other day, too. He's like, "How old do I got to be to work at Warriors Heart?"

[52:55] Oh.

And I'm like,

"That's awesome."

I'm like, "Oh, 18, but I could probably like get you over there." Awesome. Strange.

I' I've gotten him a couple shirts. They don't quite fit yet, but they're uh but yeah, no, he um he's come out and and worked a canine with uh my service dog out on the obstacle course and just had,

you know, we went through the whole class and he just had so much fun uh doing that. But just just having being able to get to like experience, you know, being a father, being a husband, um and and learning that as long as, you know, and and trying to um you know, keep my recovery intact, too, you know, um you know, there's there's compromise in that um where we're, you know, where I'm gone for a meeting, you know, and and just reassuring my wife that like this is I got to keep my myself upright because this all goes away if you know on that first drink.

[54:00] Yes. If you don't continue to work that program and take care of you, you can't take care of anybody else.

Did you ever think in the early days of recovery that any of this would be possible? Being a K9 trainer at Warriors Heart, marriage, kids, happiness. Did you think any of those things were possible?

No. like I I just didn't want to drink anymore. I sold myself way short.

Mhm.

Um

and I've heard that by so many folks like, "Oh, dude, if if um

like I never thought I, you know, we bought our first house. Like I've never owned a house." Like, "Wow, wow." Like, so every picture I hang, every you know, light bulb I change, that's mine,

you know? and and with, you know, with my wife, like we're building this thing. Like, we're gradually, you know, putting new pictures on the walls and and and the um and remembering and laughing about like where we were a year ago and like, man, it was tough. like um but yeah, it's just it it's been such an amazing uh journey as far as as far as you know, getting married and then being in recovery. You know, uh I got I got a um a promotion to K9 trainer on exactly on 3.5. Three and a half years, right?

[55:22] Three and a half years so you get promoted.

Oh, cool. like like all these cool like little like god shots, man. Like, hey, you know, here you go. You know, you don't get a chip, but how about a promotion, you know?

Yeah.

You know, and and never never even expecting it, you know. I I I remember like my allergies started, you know.

Yeah. The the pollen made your eyes water at you.

The cedar on my way home. I'm like because I'd never had a promotion. I've had changes of job status, you know, like unemployed or employed, you know, and and this was like I'm like, man, I took a step up and it was so cool and like because I've been um I put myself into canine school

just to um just to and I realized like everything that I'd learned I'd already learned. they were just putting new words to it and new like um and I'm like cool man this is this is way cool I've done this before

[56:27] um and it's a great class because it's also a community of of folks to

to take suggestions from and get ideas and things like that. So that's a very cool journey.

Now you felt your purpose when you were coming up was to follow in the family's footsteps you know be a law enforcement officer and you found great purpose in that. didn't work out. Now you have this life here. Which do you feel brings more purpose? Which would you rather have?

Um I definitely did needed one to get the other. Um if I was never a policeman, I I wouldn't be here. Warriors heart, right?

True. So, I I believe that like my purpose here is it's starting to or um how do I put this? Like I needed the other I needed uh the other to get this

and this is the what I wanted. But I just didn't know it, you know, cuz now I'm helping my brothers and sisters go through um, you know, and and invest in themselves just like I got to invest in myself. And and I I don't see it as like this isn't a rehab. This is an investment,

[57:45] you know. Absolutely. And and and if I didn't if you'd have told me like, "Okay, in in three and a half years, you're going to get a promotion, have a house, um you get a wife, kids, and you're going to be happy, joyous, and free." Dude, I just signed up for two tours of that like a long time ago, you know? Like, yeah, give me that. Like, and all the friends that I made. You ever play the tape through and imagine if you hadn't made that choice to be vulnerable, to get help, to to live a better life, what that life would look like?

Yeah. It doesn't go very far.

Yeah.

It kind of it kind of ends very abruptly.

Yeah.

Um and it it kind of goes into this black space of Yeah. I could be, you know, dead, incarcerated, um homeless, you know, all the and so it's like not really a movie I want to watch, you know? Yeah. Now, if there's one thing that you could tell yourself based on the experience that you have now looking back in the worst time of your life, what advice would you give yourself?

[58:50] Um, pick up the phone sooner.

Pick it up now. Pick it up. you know, um, back when I was when I first started when when alcohol was really really becoming an issue, Warriors Heart didn't exist. It did, you know, later. So, I I would have probably said pick up the phone sooner, but I'm I'm extremely ecstatic that I I picked it up when I did.

I'm glad that you did, too. And you're right. We had to go through those things to get to where we are now. We can't live our life in regret. That's what the training here that we do. That's what AA teaches us, you know, to get away from that regret. Teaches us difference between shame and guilt. You know, we be a and we can be able to move past that.

And then look at the things that have come to fruition because of that. You know, you go to another treatment center where you're able to give hope and strength to others. Then you came to work here um where you're able to continue that journey while also helping yourself, right? promoted, got a house, married, kids. Man, that's pretty impressive, dude. I'm proud of you. I'm glad that you that you made that step.

[59:59] Yeah,

definitely. I'm definitely um eternally grateful. Um

and AA, we call it the promises coming true. And if you have any experience with AA, you know exactly what we're talking about. You know, all the wonderful things returning to your life.

And AA is about so much more than just not drinking and drugging. It's about how to deal with anger when somebody backs into you tractor supplies. It's about how to deal with your yourself. It's about how to become a better person again and to live life again

and to take care of your own issues so that you continue continue to be there right

for your family and for yourself. You mentioned WA Warriors Anonymous, right? Our own branded AA. We meet on Zoom. I think it's almost seven days a week now.

Yeah.

Yeah. We even have uh Warriors Anonymous Alanon, you know, for the family of first responders and and veterans who are going through this. So, it's it's really going in a bunch of different directions to be able to help our guys out,

right?

But it's a huge it's a huge uh huge leap when we we take that leap of faith to try to better ourselves, right?

[1:01:01] But it's it brings us to so many beautiful places. So, I agree with you. Don't put it off. Reach out. call um anybody that's listening to this podcast, the number to call be 855-610003 or go to warriorsheart.com. You can connect in so many ways. We can even get you connected with the Warriors Anonymous Zoom meetings, you know, in the Warriors Anonymous WhatsApp uh chat group to be able to reach out and talk to other guys. But, you know, you don't have to struggle alone. You don't have to put it off. So many beautiful things can come into your life when you're vulnerable and ready to change.

Absolutely.

Yeah. Well, Chris, man, I appreciate you being here today. We could talk about dogs all day long, too, but maybe we'll do that on another episode. Thank you for sharing a little bit of your story with us.

Oh, absolutely.

All right.

Cuz the first thing that they said was, "Welcome home.