

The Lawyer, the Addict

A high-powered Silicon Valley attorney dies. His ex-wife investigates, and finds a web of drug abuse in his profession.

By EILENE ZIMMERMAN Photographs by DAVID BRANDON GEETING

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In July 2015, something was very wrong with my ex-husband, Peter. His behavior over the preceding 18 months had been erratic and odd. He could be angry and threatening one minute, remorseful and generous the next. His voice mail messages and texts had become meandering soliloquies that didn't make sense, veering from his work travails, to car repairs, to his pet mouse, Snowball.

I thought maybe the stress of his job as a lawyer had finally gotten to him, or that he was bipolar. He had been working more than 60 hours a week for 20 years, ever since he started law school and worked his way into a partnership in the intellectual property practice of Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati, a prominent law firm based in Silicon Valley.

Then, for two days, Peter couldn't be reached. So I drove the 20 minutes or so to his house, to look in on him. Although we were divorced, we had known each other by then for nearly 30 years. We were family.

I parked in Peter's driveway, used my key to open the front door and walked up to the

living room, a loftlike space with bamboo floors bathed in sunlight.

“Peter?” I called out.

Silence. A few candy wrappers littered a counter. Peter worked so much that he rarely cooked anymore, sustaining himself largely on fast food, snacks, coffee, ibuprofen and antacids. I headed toward the bedroom, calling his name.

The door was ajar. A few crumpled and bloodied tissues were scattered on the bedsheets. And then I turned the corner and saw him, lying on the floor between the bathroom and the bedroom. His head rested on a flattened cardboard box.

In my shock, I didn't see the half-filled syringes on the bathroom sink, or the spoon, lighter and crushed pills. I didn't see the bag of white powder, or the tourniquet, or the other lighter next to the bed. The police report from that day noted several safes around the bedroom, all of them open and spilling out translucent orange pill bottles.

Peter, one of the most successful people I have ever known, died a drug addict, felled by a systemic bacterial infection common to intravenous users.

Of all the heartbreaking details of his story, the one that continues to haunt me is this: The history on his cellphone shows the last call he ever made was for work. Peter, vomiting, unable to sit up, slipping in and out of consciousness, had managed, somehow, to dial into a conference call.

The Map of Peter's Descent

None of this made sense. Not only was Peter one of the smartest people in my life, he had also been a chemist before becoming a lawyer and most likely understood how the drugs he was taking would affect his neurochemistry.

In my attempt to fathom what happened to him and how I — and everyone else in his world — missed it, I set out to create a map of Peter's life the year before he died. (To protect the privacy of our children and Peter's extended family, I'm not using his surname.)

I studied his texts to drug dealers, and I compared the timing of those with dates and times of A.T.M. withdrawals he made. I needed to see the signs I hadn't known were signs. The nonsensical conversations. The crazy hours he kept. The nights he told our children he was running out to get a soda, only to disappear.

Human beings are physically and emotionally complex, so there is no simple answer as to why Peter began abusing drugs. But as a picture of his struggle took shape before my eyes, so did another one: The further I probed, the more apparent it became that drug abuse among America's lawyers is on the rise and deeply hidden.

One of the first things I learned is that there is little research on lawyers and drug abuse. Nor is there much data on drug use among lawyers compared with the general population or white-collar workers specifically.

One of the most comprehensive studies of lawyers and substance abuse was released just seven months after Peter died. That 2016 report, from the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation and the American Bar Association, analyzed the responses of 12,825 licensed, practicing attorneys across 19 states.

Over all, the results showed that about 21 percent of lawyers qualify as problem drinkers, while 28 percent struggle with mild or more serious depression and 19 percent struggle with anxiety. Only 3,419 lawyers answered questions about drug use, and that itself is telling, said Patrick Krill, the study's lead author and also a lawyer. "It's left to speculation what motivated 75 percent of attorneys to skip over the section on drug use as if it wasn't there."

In Mr. Krill's opinion, they were afraid to answer.

Of the lawyers that did answer those questions, 5.6 percent used cocaine, crack and stimulants; 5.6 percent used opioids; 10.2 percent used marijuana and hash; and nearly 16 percent used sedatives. Eighty-five percent of all the lawyers surveyed had used alcohol in the previous year. (For comparison sake, about 65 percent of the general population drinks alcohol.)

Nearly 21 percent of the lawyers that said they had used drugs in the previous year reported "intermediate" concern about their drug use. Three percent had "severe"

concerns.

The results can be interpreted two ways, said Mr. Krill, who is also a licensed drug and alcohol counselor and whose consulting firm, Krill Strategies, works with law firms on drug abuse and mental health issues. “One is that a significantly smaller percentage of attorneys in the study are using drugs as compared to alcohol. We don’t think that’s true.”

“Alcohol is legal,” Mr. Krill said, not to mention socially acceptable. “So admitting you drink too much is not directly at odds with your role as a licensed attorney.”

Illicit drug use, however, is illegal. “I think the incidence of drug use and abuse is significantly underreported,” he said.

In the government’s most recent National Survey on Drug Use and Health report on substance abuse by industry, professional services (which include the legal profession) ranked ninth out of 19 industries in terms of illicit drug use. The entertainment industry ranked higher on the list; finance and real estate ranked lower.

The A.B.A.’s Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs’ most recent national report identified alcohol as the No. 1 substance-abuse problem for lawyers. The second most commonly abused substance was prescription drugs.

“We see two major trends in the legal profession,” said Warren Zysman, the clinical director of the EARS Recovery Program in Smithtown, N.Y., a medically supervised chemical dependency program, and the former chief executive of Addiction Care Interventions, a rehabilitation center in Manhattan for professionals, including lawyers. “One is the opioid addiction, and the other is use of benzodiazepines like Xanax.”

In recent years, he said, “we’re seeing a significant rate of increase specifically among attorneys using prescription medications that become a gateway to street drugs.” It used to be mostly alcohol, he said, “but now almost every attorney that comes in for treatment, even if they drink, they are using drugs, too — Xanax, Adderall, opiates, cocaine and crack.”

Opioids and stimulants often go hand in hand with alcohol. In fact, drugs are sometimes used to combat the symptoms of alcohol withdrawal.

Brian Cuban, a lawyer in recovery for alcohol and drug addiction and the author of the memoir “The Addicted Lawyer: Tales of the Bar, Booze, Blow and Redemption,” would regularly show up for work drunk and do a few lines of cocaine to be able to perform. “I was doing coke in the bathroom in the morning to recover from hangovers,” he said. “Cocaine got me back on focus.”

In addition to having a private practice at the time, Mr. Cuban was working for his well-known brother, the businessman Mark Cuban, who threatened to fire Brian if he didn’t get sober. “I kept thinking: ‘I’m not going to rehab. I’m a lawyer, lawyers don’t go to rehab, they aren’t in 12-step programs,’” he said. “Of course, half the people I know in my 12-step program are lawyers.”

Lisa Smith, a lawyer and recovering alcoholic and drug addict, said the only way she was able to perform in her job at the firm Pillsbury Winthrop in the early 2000s was by using cocaine to deal with alcohol withdrawal symptoms. “I was drinking during the day and at night,” said Ms. Smith, now deputy executive director of the law firm Patterson Belknap Webb & Tyler in New York and author of the memoir “Girl Walks Out of a Bar.” “I did coke because it would allow me to straighten up enough to show up to work in the afternoon.”

Professional stress also plays a role, said Dr. Daniel Angres, an associate professor of psychiatry at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. “Law firms have a culture of keeping things underground, a conspiracy of silence,” he said. “There is a desire not to embarrass people, and as long as they are performing, it’s easier to just avoid it. And there’s a lack of understanding that addiction is a disease.”

That stress became particularly acute as the economy sank after the 2008 financial crisis. Jobs became more scarce. The pressure grew to not take time off from work.

At Peter’s memorial service in 2015 — held in a place he loved, with sweeping views of the Pacific — a young associate from his firm stood up to speak of their friendship and of the bands they sometimes went to see together, only to break down in tears. Quite a few of the lawyers attending the service were bent over their phones, reading and tapping out emails.

Their friend and colleague was dead, and yet they couldn't stop working long enough to listen to what was being said about him.

Peter himself lived in a state of heavy stress. He obsessed about the competition, about his compensation, about the clients, their demands and his fear of losing them. He loved the intellectual challenge of his work but hated the combative nature of the profession, because it was at odds with his own nature.

Long before law school, when Peter was still in his early 20s and wearing his hair in a long ponytail, his passions were science, philosophy and music. One of his idols was the astronomer Carl Sagan. Another was Jimi Hendrix. He gave me books like "Siddhartha" and "Letters to a Young Poet" and played bass guitar in bands from college onward, even while a lawyer.

When he was a graduate student in chemistry, we spent whole weekends lying on the floor playing records for each other, talking about why we loved them and what memories a particular song snatched from the recesses of our minds.

After graduation, Peter worked for two small pharmaceutical companies but found the profession tedious and low paying. Having grown up in a low-income family, he didn't want to worry about paying the bills again. So he decided to use his chemistry background to become a patent lawyer.

When he graduated from law school, the starting salary of his first job in law was five times what he had earned as a chemist. But our lives were not suddenly easy. Although we had enough money, Peter's work schedule gave him little time to enjoy the fruits of his labor.

One Christmas Day early in his career, Peter's boss phoned from a ski lift in Aspen, Colo., to make sure Peter was going to finish a brief by that evening. He did, skipping dinner.

"I can't do this forever," Peter often told me. "I can't keep going like this for the next 20 years."

‘Rewarded for Being Hostile’

According to some reports, lawyers also have the highest rate of depression of any occupational group in the country. A 1990 study of more than 100 professions indicated that lawyers are 3.6 times as likely to be depressed as people with other jobs. The Hazelden study found that 28 percent of lawyers suffer depression.

“Yes, there are other stressful professions,” said Wil Miller, who practices family law in the offices of Molly B. Kenny in Bellevue, Wash. He spent 10 years as a sex crimes prosecutor, the last six months of which he was addicted to methamphetamines. “Being a surgeon is stressful, for instance — but not in the same way. It would be like having another surgeon across the table from you trying to undo your operation. In law, you are financially rewarded for being hostile.”

Peter battled his own brand of melancholy, something I found attractive in a tragically poetic, still-waters-run-deep kind of way. He used to tell me he wasn’t someone who ever really felt happy. He had moments of being “not unhappy,” he said, but his emotional range was narrow.

When something great happened, he didn’t jump for joy. When something sad happened, he didn’t break down and cry. The only times I ever saw tears in his eyes were in the hospital, right after each of our children was born.

Yet for almost a decade as an associate at various law firms, Peter displayed no photos of his children or me in his office. When I asked him why — particularly when other lawyers seemed to have photos in theirs — Peter told me he didn’t want the partners to see him as “distracted by my family.”

In many ways, Peter’s personality and abilities read like a wish list of qualities for a lawyer. Trained as a scientist, he approached problems in a deliberative, logical way. He was intelligent, ambitious and most of all hard-working, perhaps because his decision to go to law school was such an enormous commitment — financially, logistically and emotionally — that he could justify it only by being the very best.

And he was. In law school he was editor of the law review and No. 1 in his class. He

gave the speech at graduation.

He also had a single-minded focus that could border on obsessive. I remember when he became consumed with Bach's harpsichord concertos, assembling a library of every one he could find. He read about them, listened to lectures about them and even found a mathematical representation of a particular piece on YouTube, which he had us all watch. That level of focus was well suited for deep dives into the new drug formulations, medical devices and technologies with which he had to constantly and quickly familiarize himself.

The Law School Effect

Some research shows that before they start law school, law students are actually healthier than the general population, both physically and mentally. "There's good data showing that," said Andy Benjamin, a psychologist and lawyer who teaches law and psychology at the University of Washington. "They drink less than other young people, use less substances, have less depression and are less hostile."

In addition, he said, law students generally start school with their sense of self and their values intact. But, in his research, he said, he has found that the formal structure of law school starts to change that.

Rather than hew to their internal self, students begin to focus on external values, he said, like status, comparative worth and competition. "We have seven very strong studies that show this twists people's psyches and they come out of law school significantly impaired, with depression, anxiety and hostility," he said.

Academics often study law students because students are considered a bellwether for the profession. "They are the canaries in the coal mine," Dr. Benjamin said.

Wil Miller, the lawyer and former methamphetamine addict, said that in his experience, law school encouraged students to take emotion out of their decisions. "When you start reinforcing that with grades and money, you aren't just suppressing your emotions," he said. "You're fundamentally changing who you are."

Research studying lawyers' happiness supports this notion. "The psychological factors seen to erode during law school are the very factors most important for the well-being of lawyers," Lawrence Krieger, a professor at Florida State University College of Law, and Kennon Sheldon, a professor of psychology at the University of Missouri, wrote in their 2015 paper "What Makes Lawyers Happy?" Conversely, they wrote, "the factors most emphasized in law schools — grades, honors and potential career income — have nil to modest bearing on lawyer well-being."

After students began law school they experienced "a marked increase in depression, negative mood and physical symptoms, with corresponding decreases in positive affect and life satisfaction," the professors wrote.

Students also shed some of their idealism. Within the first year of law school, students' motivation for studying law and becoming lawyers shifted from "helping and community-oriented values to extrinsic, rewards-based values."

Young lawyers in treatment at the Center for Network Therapy, an ambulatory detox facility in Middlesex, N.J., frequently tell Dr. Indra Cidambi, the medical director, that the reality of working as a lawyer does not match what they had pictured while in law school. She has found that law students often drink and use drugs until they start their first job. After that, Dr. Cidambi said, "it's mostly alcohol, until they are established as senior associates or partners and they move back to opiates."

"These aren't the majority of lawyers," she added. "But there are quite a number abusing drugs, and once they get to heroin, it's very hard to break it."

'That's Impossible'

For the last two years of his life, every time Peter and I were together — whether it was back-to-school night, our son's cross country meets or our daughter's high school graduation — people would ask me if he was O.K. They asked if he had cancer, an eating disorder, a metabolic disorder, AIDS. But they never asked about drugs.

Drugs didn't cross my mind, either. Not even the day I found his body, surrounded by

drug paraphernalia, and called 911.

That day in Peter's house, the emergency medical workers told me right away that it was probably a drug overdose. I remember saying, "That's impossible." After all, I said, he was a partner at a law firm. He had an Ivy League education.

"How could that be?" I asked one of them. "He was so smart."

ID around her neck and clipboard on her lap, she nodded at me with a look of understanding. "We see a lot of this now," she said, meaning wealthy, accomplished men and women who start out with pain pills and graduate to amphetamines or heroin.

As I cleared out Peter's house after he died, I found receipts from medical-supply companies that had delivered things like bandages and tourniquets to his office address. Yet I don't think addiction crossed the mind of anyone he worked with, either.

Law firms are often reluctant to discuss substance abuse with their lawyers. The reason is not a malicious one, said Terry Harrell, a lawyer, substance abuse counselor and chairwoman of the A.B.A. Commission on Lawyers Assistance Programs. Law-firm leadership, she said, doesn't really know what signs to look for when it comes to addiction. And when it's happening, she said, they are so busy themselves, "they just don't see it."

When asked what the American Bar Association is doing to help combat mental health and substance abuse, Linda Klein, its president, said the A.B.A.'s requirement for continuing professional development and education "recommends that lawyers be required to take one credit of programming every three years that focuses on mental health or substance abuse disorders." She added that "by requiring lawyers to attend such programs periodically, the hope is that these concerns will be reduced."

It's difficult, though, to imagine that one class every three years would have prevented Peter — or anyone else — from becoming an addict. Real change, experts and recovering addicts say, needs to happen at the law-firm level, but that is complicated by an entrenched culture of privacy combined with an allegiance to billable hours.

Ms. Smith, the lawyer formerly of Pillsbury Winthrop, says she doesn't know what her

previous firm knew or didn't know about her substance abuse. "They never said a thing to me," she said. "And during that entire time I was an addict, I didn't get a single negative performance review."

Edward Flanders, managing partner in Pillsbury's Manhattan office, said the firm was not aware of Ms. Smith's substance abuse issues when she was there. Ms. Smith spoke about her experience to the firm's New York City employees in March.

"Hearing about her experience was pretty eye-opening for the firm, and it's not something we want anyone else to have to go through alone," Mr. Flanders said.

Recalling Missed Signals

I've spent the past two years marinating in this mess, trying my best to navigate things like the byzantine probate process and my children's broken hearts. I firmly believe that law-firm culture, particularly at big firms, has to become more compassionate and more aware of the signs that one of their own is struggling.

Looking back, I can see the signs I missed.

There was the time our son broke his wrist playing soccer four years ago and was prescribed Vicodin; Peter rifled through my medicine cabinet looking for the leftovers. "I use them for my back," he said.

There was the holiday concert in which our son's band was performing where Peter showed up late and jittery, looking so thin that I noticed his head seemed too big for his neck. After the show I walked with him to his car, and he complained that he was getting pushback from his firm about working from home so much.

"I'm more productive at home, but they have to see me, physically, in the office," he said. "They don't think I'm working if I'm not there."

They were right.

And there was the time in early 2015 when my son told me Peter had received a

shipment from Amazon that he had opened at the dining room table, pulling out boxes of syringes, bandages, cotton balls and wound cleanser. Peter explained it away as simply stocking up on medical supplies.

My son was puzzled by that. But by then his father's behavior had become so strange, this almost seemed normal. "I just put my headphones on," my son told me, "and said, 'I have to do homework.'"

Years ago, when Peter was still a relatively new associate, he would joke that the perfect drug for him would be the combination of an antidepressant, a pain reliever and a stimulant. When I cleaned out his house, I found the ingredients for it: Vicodin, Tramadol, Adderall, cocaine, Xanax, crystal meth and a kaleidoscope of pills I couldn't identify, but not for lack of trying.

Yet even as addiction was taking over his life, Peter continued working. In the notebooks he used to keep track of injection times and dosages, he also made cryptic notes about client calls and meetings, lists of things needed to prepare documents, filing deadlines.

Being a patent lawyer is intellectually grueling work, and Peter was good at it — really good at it — for a long time. Perhaps the arrogance that grows from a profession in which your advice is worth \$600 an hour is what allowed him to believe he didn't need to ask for help, that he could kick this on his own. Just another item on his lengthy to-do list.

In fact, while cleaning out his house I found a list of New Year's resolutions Peter wrote in December 2014, tucked into the bottom of a dresser drawer. "Run three races, spend more time with kids," his note to himself read.

And in red marker, the word "quit."

Correction: July 15, 2017

An earlier version of this article misstated the period when Wil Miller, a former sex crimes prosecutor, was addicted to methamphetamines. It was the last six months of his tenure, not the entire 10 years he was in the job.

The earlier version also misspelled Mr. Miller's given name. It is Wil, not Will.

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