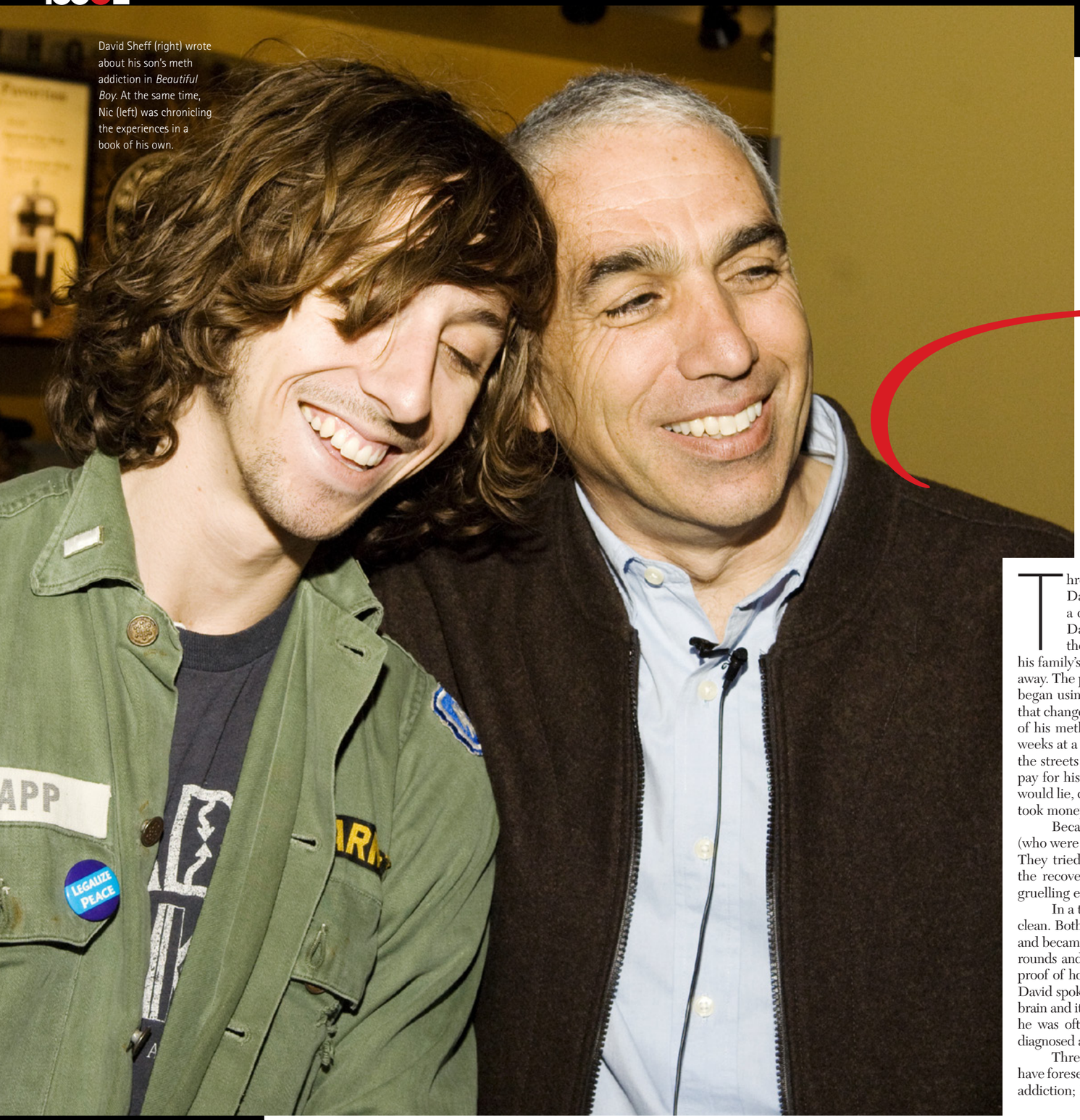


David Sheff (right) wrote about his son's meth addiction in *Beautiful Boy*. At the same time, Nic (left) was chronicling the experiences in a book of his own.

A FATHER'S *love*

JOURNALIST David Sheff thought he'd seen everything. Then his son developed a near-fatal drug addiction. Here, he tells **Rebecca Wallwork** about their road to recovery

Three years ago, accomplished author and journalist David Sheff tackled his toughest subject yet. For nearly a decade, his son Nic had battled drug addiction, and David eventually found a certain catharsis by writing the heart-rending memoir *Beautiful Boy*, which tracks his family's bewilderment and struggle as they watch Nic waste away. The problems for Nic had started in high school, when he began using pot and alcohol; soon he would discover the drug that changed everything: crystal methamphetamine. In the grip of his meth benders, Nic would disappear without a trace for weeks at a time. Only later did his family learn that he lived on the streets of San Francisco and even turned to prostitution to pay for his out-of-control habit. When he did return home he would lie, cheat and steal in an effort to procure more. He even took money from his baby half-brother's piggy bank.

Because Nic was in his early-20s, David and Nic's mother (who were divorced) had no legal right to force him into rehab. They tried – and sometimes Nic went – but he often began the recovery process only to relapse along the way. It was a gruelling experience for everyone involved.

In a twist, Nic wrote *Tweak*, his own memoir about getting clean. Both David and Nic's books were released simultaneously and became media sensations – the men made the US talk-show rounds and Nic's story of meth's hold on his life was held up as proof of how dangerous the drug was. On a national book tour, David spoke about the ways crystal meth permanently alters the brain and its devastating effect on an addict's family. Nic revealed he was often overwhelmed by mental illness, which was only diagnosed after he sought help for his addiction.

Three years later, both men are in places they could not have foreseen. David is at work on a science-oriented book about addiction; Nic is prepping the release of a memoir that picks up where *Tweak* left off. Opening their lives for public viewing wasn't easy for them, but it did serve as a coda – for now – to their cautionary tale. David's story, in particular, resonated not just because it shared the frustrations and dead ends that every parent faces as their children become adults. It also illustrated just how deep a father's love for his child ultimately runs. David talked to **madison** about how the experience changed his life...

Looking back, I see how unprepared I was for any of this. I wasn't naive about drugs, but I still felt that there was no way anything like this could ever happen to my son. I had a certain view of drug addicts and alcoholics – you know, I thought they should look like the homeless people we see on the streets in big cities. You step by them with a sense of guilt and embarrassment and horror. Nic became one of those people. It was inconceivable.

Even after Nic became sober and had been well for a long time, I felt there was a story to tell that could shake people up by saying, "You are not immune. This can happen to you." Because if I had been prepared, or forewarned, I would have been wiser. I would have at least tried to intervene earlier. I felt a real obligation to try and tell this story.

One reason was very specifically about crystal meth. It was at a time in America – really anywhere in the world – that crystal meth was not on the radar. [Nic began using the drug just over 10 years ago.] We'd heard a lot of warnings about crack cocaine and heroin and some other drugs, but crystal meth was not something that was as available.

I started out as this aghast, horrified father, disgusted with what was happening to my son. How could he behave in this way, stealing from us and lying to me? How could he hurt his little brother and sister, whom I knew he loved? I was judging him with a kind of moral lens. ➔

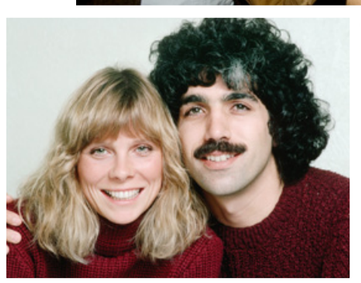
Then I spoke to some doctors and experts – trying to make decisions on where to send Nic or how to intervene; or if I should intervene; what was going on with him; why he was acting the way he was. I came to understand that he was very ill and his behaviour was a result of this illness. His brain was damaged.

That allowed me to feel a little more compassionate and less judgmental. Not that I wasn't angry, but it helped me make better decisions. If someone you know is ill, you get them treated by professionals. Once I understood that, it made the path clearer.

Our family was traumatised for those five or so years I covered in the book. At the end of a trauma, you have a sense of relief for having survived it but you don't necessarily feel healed. Reliving the horror to write the book was not easy, but it was a big part of healing. It got it out of my body and my head.

As for *Tweak*, I don't have to tell you that reading it was absolute hell. It was just so painful to realise that as bad as I thought things had been [when Nic disappeared for days or weeks at a time], the reality was even worse. It was hard to make it through the book. I was in tears. It's every parent's nightmare – right there in black and white. But there was also a piece of me that was able to see through that and be proud of Nic for making it through and writing the book. I was proud to realise he's a talented writer.

Nic Sheff with his parents, David and Vicki. BELOW David and Vicki in 1981, before Nic's birth.



"It was just so painful to realise that as bad as I thought things had been, the reality was even worse"

The response to the two books was overwhelming. I usually hide – I write and spend a lot of time with my family. We were exposed in an intense way for a long time. For weeks, Nic and I were out on a book tour. We also talked at events where people came because they had been through this, too. It was intensely emotional, but also kind of wonderful. Useful, too. It was cathartic.

By far the best part of the tour was being with Nic. It was fantastic. We had so much fun. We would have a book event and then go to the movies together. We had already been through a lot and were very close by then. We had been in in family therapy. We'd had a million conversations. This was a way for us to continue that.

We met so many people who could relate to either one of us. It helped me understand more about what Nic had been through and I think it helped Nic understand what our family – Vicki [Nic's biological mother], Karen (Nic's stepmum) and me and our other children, Jasper and Daisy – had been through.

Having two books published about our family was a little overwhelming. The openness around us was scary, but we were connecting with people. Jasper and Daisy talked about kids at school who had read the books and said things to them that were meaningful and supportive. Somebody came up to Jasper and said, "I didn't know you were going through that. I'm so sorry." This was just a kid, somebody he'd never even spoken to before. So the books were a way to connect with people in a very deep way. But of course I was worried about it. I didn't want it to be too much for anybody. I don't think it was.

Things didn't change overnight once Nic was getting sober. We slowly had to adjust to not being in crisis mode: not being terrified all the time, or in those perpetual, horrible states of exhaustion and depression and worry. Dealing with the stuff that normal families deal with was heaven.

But the thing that has continued is that connection with others. We are now part of a world of people who are suffering from addiction and mental illness. I get letters from people in this situation every day. There are so many places where it's still not possible to admit that you are addicted or that you have a child or parent or brother or sister who is addicted. People are just looking for somebody who can understand.

I've been in the grocery store and somebody will come up and just start to cry. A lot. That can be overwhelming. But if I had to choose whether or not people approach me, I would choose to do this work because it's very compelling. It's more fulfilling – more significant and important – than interviewing rock stars or writing about technology companies, which is what I used to do. I've written other books that did okay, but when *Beautiful Boy* became successful, it was a lot more meaningful that it was this book, not the other ones. Because it was about something that felt so important.

Jasper and Daisy are now 17 and 14. No one has to tell them that drugs are dangerous. They've seen it. They've lived it. And in some ways, Karen's job and my job are almost the opposite – "the opposite" meaning to make sure they are not overly freaked out because of what happened with Nic. To allow them to grow up. They really were afraid of their teenage years because Nic, as a teenager, was out of control. We try to remember to not make them suffer for that.

Nic says that he used drugs because he felt he was in enormous pain and he couldn't deal with it. Now that I understand that, the conversations about drugs around here are different. They're often about understanding why people use – if they use because of stress or angst or depression, those are the things to try and focus on.

Drug abuse and subsequent addiction can be the result of undiagnosed and unrelated mental illness or a range of psychological and social problems.

My advice for parents of kids who may be using drugs is complicated. The first thing is to be aware. I learned the hard way how easy it is for parents to ignore what is happening in front of their eyes, because it's so scary. But ignoring it is dangerous. So I say: really pay attention, and if you see signs of problems, don't ignore them. Get help. Therapists, drug testing – all the things that might help you know what's going on – try it.

Then, intervene right away and try to figure out what to do. Realise that this is an illness. When we're ill or someone we love is ill, we know what to do. We find the best experts and doctors we can to get treatment. With addiction it's also about recognising what's going on and then following a course modelled on the fact that this is a health problem – not a moral problem or a criminal problem. If someone is sick, you want to get them treated, as quickly as you can.

Until a short time ago I would have said that the constant fear and worry never goes away. But it sort of has. Nic is now 28 and he has changed. That doesn't mean he's no longer an addict who has to be careful and could relapse.

I worry about all my kids and always will. But I have seen Nic grow in such a way that I don't worry the way I used to, when it was all-consuming, when the phone ringing at night was going to be some catastrophe.

I'm now working on a new book about the science of addiction. There's a need for people to understand what it means to be addicted, what happens to the brain, the body and what works in terms of treatment and what doesn't. I thought I would write *Beautiful Boy* and then go back to the other kinds of stories I was working on. But I was touched by other people's experiences. They were so lost. They were where I was at the very beginning of this journey. And I realised that I was not ready to let this go.

the SON also rises

NIC SHEFF COMES CLEAN

Throughout the final pages of *Tweak*, we find Nic Sheff living in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He's in rehab – again. And it wouldn't be his last time. Since *Tweak* propelled him into the spotlight two years ago, Nic has travelled across the US to promote his tale of addiction and recovery. He's found and lost loves, adopted a stray dog and tried all manner of "fixes" after relapsing and recovering more than once.

When **madison** caught up with him last year, Nic, who now lives in LA, had almost finished his first draft of *We All Fall Down*, a new memoir aimed at younger readers that's slated to be published in April. Now 28, he has spent countless hours looking inward and talking through his demons in therapy and it shows. He speaks articulately about his struggles to get and stay clean and he comes across as charming and honest – even when he has owned up to being anything but.

"When I was writing the second half of *Tweak*, I was still drinking, and smoking pot," he admits. "While I was on my book tour, I would come back home to where I was living in Savannah, Georgia, I'd smoke pot on the weekend and then I'd go back out on the book tour and talk to all these people about being sober."

"Sometimes I just get so frustrated with myself," he says. "I have so much knowledge about the disease of addiction and the 12 steps – and I still couldn't do it. I always ended up falling down again and again and again."

Nic has now been clean for nearly two years. What helped him turn the corner this time? He seems to think it was the slow process of examining himself, taking something from each of the treatment centres he's been to, and finally clicking with a therapist and one particular outpatient program. "Some rehabs work well for certain people but didn't work as well for me," he says. "Addiction is such a hard battle to fight and it seems unrealistic that one go at rehab is going to fix you for the rest of your life."

"I just have this beautiful, simple life now," he says. "Every day I take my dog on a big hike or a run in the morning. Then I come home and I write, and at night I either do some recovery-related thing or I go out to the movies. It's a life I never thought that I would ever want. But having it is so much more satisfying than what I used to do."

Nic, who is engaged to be married, says he feels strong now. He also feels cut off. "I'm at odds with 99 per cent of youth culture. It feels like someone my age who's not going out, getting drunk and high, is weird." Accepting this has been a milestone. "It seems so easy," Nic says almost wistfully. "But the fact is being a drug addict and alcoholic makes me different from those people. When I start to fantasise about what my life would be like if I was 'normal' and if I could drink, it's helpful to think about how far I've come – the awareness of what I love and who I am – and to hold onto that. I don't want to lose it." **m**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY WIREIMAGE.COM; CORBIS.