

## THE SIZER UN

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PILLS, CIGARETTES, AND  
FARTLEKS

*This post was written by Justin Garrity, leader of the Oak City Recovery Run Club. The [Keep RLGH Independent 4 Miler](#) will start and finish in front of [Healing Transitions](#) and is raising money to help support the amazing work that they do.*

The yellowed walls trapped the lingering smoke in the dingy room at the local Motel 6. Empty liquor bottles and tall blue discarded bud light cans littered the counters and floor. A pile of women's clothing sprawled across the bed: a balled-up black and white halter top came to a rest atop a cut-off blue jean skirt. A gaggle of hangers tore through the black trash bag that held the rest of this woman's stuff. This ripped trash bag and a cracking, plastic, dollar-store linen basket held her entire life, containers that seemed destined to break—much like we were. The cigarette butts filling three black ashtrays made the room reek of poison and discarded hope.

She sat on the floor wearing a yellow spaghetti strap shirt, naked from the waist down. She had strawberry blonde hair with light white streaks through it and a three-leaf clover tattooed on her neck. Blood ran down the inside of her arm and slowly dripped from her pinky finger onto the matted carpet. Her eyes were fluttering open and closed. She was talking incessantly, but I could not make out anything she said.



Hotels, parked cars, bathrooms—they were all home to me. Although I was intimately familiar with this setting, I felt oddly out of place as I looked around the room. This was not who I was supposed to be. When my eyes focused on the mirror, I could not recognize the person staring back at me. My ribs protruded through a thin veil of pale blue skin. Those haunted, demonic eyes, glowing a burnt red, scared me, and I saw my fear reflected right back at me. Here I was in this hell I had often tried to escape but, through my inability to break free on my own, I found myself ensnared in it once again. Staring at the macabre figure in the mirror, completely ashamed of what I had once again devolved into, I heard three loud bangs at the door followed by an authoritative, “Cary Police—open up, or we’re coming in!”



They didn’t take long to find the drugs, so I went to jail.

Best night of my life.

Born in Charlotte, North Carolina, I grew up in Cary and Apex. My two loving parents and great kid sister gave me an idyllic childhood. We played together, travelled together throughout the United States and spent long summer days in the family boat skiing across Lake Jordan. Every day at 5:30 we ate our family dinner together. Growing up, I played in the Capital Area Soccer League and, during senior year, my high school soccer team won the state championship. I had always found fulfillment through athletics, and my family was proud of my performance. I was also a good student: at Apex High School, my 3.5 grade point average and participation in school clubs allowed me to be accepted into and eventually to graduate from the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Along the way, I worked steadily in the food and beverage industry, eventually rising to manage a Morrisville restaurant shortly after leaving college. As I dreamed about what life held in store for me, never once did I think I would be living in a car parked outside the local Wal-Mart, shivering not because of the cold November air but because I was out of heroin and suffering withdrawal. This was not supposed to happen to me—Mom thought I was her golden boy; Dad was still proud of his firstborn son, and I saw myself as a high-level athlete with goals and a future.

When I was 12, I started smoking pot. As a pale, red-headed, freckled-faced kid, I did not have the highest self-esteem during those middle-school years. I wanted to fit in with the older, cooler high school kid from down the street, and he liked to get high, so to win his approval I followed right along. Smoking dope was relaxing and made me laugh but, more importantly, it helped me feel like I fit in. As I grew older, I learned how to lead two separate lives: the model student-athlete with the good reputation and the popular party guy with the good drugs. As high school progressed, the drugs became a little harder, the parties a little bigger and the people a little shadier. To keep up with both of my lives, I resorted to lying—at first to my parents, then to my friends and inevitably to myself.



From a pretty early age I knew I needed help; I had noticed that I liked to party a touch differently than the other kids. Once alcohol hit my lips, I lost control of outcomes—I didn't know what would happen on a given night: I might end up enjoying a nice evening at the bar, or I might end up in jail, again. The pot gradually turned to powder, and the powder eventually turned to pills. College became a wild ride of cocaine parties followed by dark periods of isolation filled with self-loathing and desperation as I locked myself away from the world and tried to fill my hollowed soul with those hallowed tiny blue pills. Opiates enabled me to function at work or in school—they made me stronger and faster, smarter and funnier. I had convinced myself I was nothing without those little pills. A mental obsession to use, reinforced by the physical side effects when not using,

trapped me within the cycle of addiction. After a few stints in mental hospitals and a rehab, accompanied by UNC-Wilmington's firm suggestion that I leave their campus because of my drug and alcohol charges, I moved back home with my parents. Although the school eventually allowed me back and I even managed to graduate, I continued to struggle because the consequences I had faced were insufficient to convince me to reject drugs in favor of some better means of fulfillment.

After college I bounced around a couple places, burned more bridges and, once again, ended up back home with the folks. This time living at home worked well for me. Since I lacked access to the pills and somehow moderated my drinking, I was able to set a goal and start training for the City of Oaks Half-Marathon. I found joy in running. I would hit the Nog on Mondays, keep up my mileage during the week and join Galloway for long runs on the weekends. When I first started, I could not run a quarter mile without stopping but, on race day, I finished my first half in 1 hour and 35 minutes—I was doing really well for someone who still smoked cigarettes! Preparing for this half marathon taught me that running countered my self-defeating, addictive impulses; it strengthened me emotionally, physically and mentally.

Shortly after this athletic milestone, however, I found myself hooked on heroin. In a few months' time I had lost sight of how great it felt to run; of what it gave me physically, spiritually and emotionally. I resisted hanging out with those positively influencing my life, turning instead to the comforts of a more familiar crowd. I now understand that, since my disease of addiction will never go away, I can only arrest its progress by involving myself in positive, recovery-related activities. I now understand that, if I stop taking the actions that promote sobriety, I will eventually use again and, when I use anything, I lose everything.

By the end of 2013, I was living out of my car and desperate for change. Once, when I snuck back home for a shower, my mom firmly directed me to leave, informing me that I was no longer free to use the water in her house. Although it made me feel as dirty on the inside as I was on the outside, it was the kindest thing she has ever done for me. Instead of me cleaning up temporarily in the shower, we looked up rehabilitation facilities, and she brought me to [Healing Transitions](#) (formerly The Healing Place) so that I could have a shot at cleaning up for good. Crying, we said goodbye as I got the first glimpse of my new life.



Healing Transitions works miracles. Shortly after arriving, however, I wanted nothing more than to leave. Here I was living in shelter with no money and taking my showers with the homeless men of Raleigh. This was certainly a big fall from the upper middle-class, suburban Cary lifestyle I had grown accustomed to. I stayed three months, learned a lot about addiction, made some good friends but, in the end, decided it was time to head out—those miracles were not yet within my comfort zone. After three weeks of staying sober on my own, I inevitably ended up using with my old girlfriend again at that Motel 6, feeling sick, tired and lost.

Released from jail, I headed straight back to Healing Transitions. I was done. My three days of self-will in that hotel room had done nothing positive for me. The drugs didn't work anymore. I couldn't get high enough to wash away the feelings of guilt, shame and remorse my choices had filled me with. What did help, however, was that, while I was lying in Bed #19 at Healing Transitions' Detox, all the friends I had made over the previous three months showed up with hugs and smiles—greeting me and demonstrating that here I was still loved. Unlike my first attempt to join the program, this time I enthusiastically dove headfirst into everything Healing Transitions had to offer.

Healing Transitions is a homeless shelter which incorporates a long-term addiction recovery program. With food, shelter and clothing provided free to participants, this

program takes roughly a year to complete. HT's peer-support recovery structure allows participants to make significant changes within themselves while also being of service to others. The program provided me the time and support I needed to completely change everything about myself and create the person I wanted to be— a person my family and I, myself, could be proud of.

Each day we were allowed off campus to eat lunch at the downtown soup kitchen, and that was when I took up running again. I ran every day all over Raleigh. I climbed Boylan each day and spent many hours cruising the hills at Dix. I ran whether it was cold or hot, rainy or clear. I began to fall back in love with running, reconnecting to that feeling I experienced while training for my first half marathon. These runs gave me a chance to reflect on my life and where I wanted to take it. I grew stronger and more confident, running also relieved the stresses of living with 150 other men while attempting to rebuild my life. Running became my redemption, a vital tool for my Recovery; now it acts as a stabilizing agent from which I keep my life progressing forward.

When I finished the Healing Transitions' program in August of 2015, I had been sober for over a year—my longest time without any substance over the previous 14 years. My family had come back into my life, and we were stronger than ever—we were back to running (and sometimes winning) races together. I had a great job and new friends. I ran a few more halves and eventually went on to run my first full marathon— Tobacco Road. Although I badly wanted to qualify for Boston on that first race, an overzealous start caught up with me towards the end, bonking my chances.

I recently celebrated 3 years of sobriety, and my life has gotten progressively better. After much deliberation, I took a leap of faith and left that great job to pursue my passion for helping others; Recently accepted into NC State's Masters of Social Work program, I now work at Healing Transitions, and I feel incredibly honored to serve others in the place that gave me everything.

Meanwhile, a friend of mine was still working his way through HT's program after I had left, and we would take long runs together; he was training for the Rock and Roll marathon a couple of years ago. After every run, we would sit, drink coffee and discuss starting a run club to involve the guys at HT in running because of the incredibly helpful effects it had on us as we were navigating our roads to Recovery. After he completed the



program, however, he moved to Greenville to help people with criminal pasts re-integrate into society, and the ball never got rolling—until now. This past April, a current HT participant and I started the Oak City Recovery Run Club. The club is open to runners and walkers of all levels; we never look down on anyone unless we are helping them up. Our goal is to pair the running community with the Recovery community in support of people seeking healthy ways to better themselves as they build meaning and purpose into their lives. Although we are currently a small group, we will soon flourish because our mission is just and it embodies service to others. We typically run 3 and 5 mile loops through the killer hills and beautiful views of Dix campus, and we are also exploring some of the flatter routes on the Greenway around Lake Raleigh. We meet 6 PM Tuesdays at 1251 Goode Street in Raleigh (near the Farmer’s Market in front of Healing Transitions), and we would love to have anyone looking for a good run come out and join us. [Check us out on Facebook as well.](#)

I never thought I would enjoy the life I do today. I thought I was destined to die overdosed and locked behind a bathroom stall. By thoroughly working on my Recovery, I have gained a life second to none: I wake up each morning grateful and content because I now see that living a healthy and meaningful life based on service to others provides that purposeful fulfillment I was seeking through my drug use. Whereas I had once forgotten how to smile, that’s not the case anymore, and the man the mirror reflects back

to me now is no longer that demon-haunted skeleton. For anyone struggling, please know there is hope. I never imagined I could be sober for more than a few days. I did not think I was worthy of sobriety, but I have come to find that anyone is capable and deserving to live unchained from the bondage of addiction. We do recover, and you can too—I see miracles happen every day.

I no longer run towards my addiction; rather I run towards Recovery and the self I once thought I had lost. I run like someone left the gate open. I run like I feel: free.



*The Size Run is curated by Alex Warren and Brent Francese, co-owner's at [Runologie](#).*