

Shannon's Interview with Joe Putignano

November 5, 2018

Never Give Up!

SL: Please describe your childhood?

JP: I am the youngest of 4 from an Irish-Italian catholic family. I grew up in a restaurant and bar that my parents owned, which made alcohol the center of our lives. My parents had a very strong work ethic and most of their lives revolved around the family business, but I didn't realize when I was younger that my parents worked so much because they were drinking at the bar.

At 8 years old I started doing gymnastics, and I was hell bent on making it to the Olympics and not becoming anything like my family because I saw the negative impact alcohol had on them. In many ways, I was afraid to drink because I saw the many fights it caused in my family and watched it destroy all our holidays. Gymnastics was my only escape, I focused all my energy on it and began competing at a young age. It seemed to be the only way out of my parent's alcoholism, but sometimes we don't realize the thing we are running from is coming straight for us.

SL: How and when did addiction begin manifesting, at what age?

JP: My alcoholism began the moment I had my first beer around the age of 15, but I managed to keep an eye on it because I was still competing in gymnastics. Most of the kids in my high school had already been drinking, so it didn't seem like I was behaving any differently but when I started drinking...I was the first to start and the last to put it down. It was the early 90's, the rave era in Boston and I started going to them a lot with my friends. I fell in love with the scene immediately because it was so opposite from my gymnastics life of discipline and pain. I also fell in love with the drugs and slowly watched it destroy my passion and drive for gymnastics. I had much

less control with drugs than I thought I did with alcohol and it became obvious to everyone that I was using because my personality changed so quickly. Gymnastics is a very structured sport and I had devoted most of my life to it, but now that I was using, my whole attitude and outlook on it changed. My life began to revolve around drugs, but I kept one foot in gymnastics because it was the only honest authentic part of myself that I didn't want to lose. This was my first lesson in powerlessness because the more I used, the more I saw how it affected my gymnastics and year after year, I watched drugs and alcohol destroy the one thing I believed I was put on this earth to do.

SL: How did your addiction progress from there?

JP: My addiction progressed so quickly that I went from a State and National gymnastics champ to homeless in the matter of a few years. I would go from rehab to homeless shelter then back to rehab, but nothing could stop me from using. I had never experienced anything so powerful in my whole life. I had been addicted to benzodiazepines and alcohol but found my way to New York City and started shooting heroin. Heroin seemed to be the perfect fit because it changed the perception I had of myself. Even though I was doing terrible in life, when I was high, I was convinced I was fine and that I would someday take care of this. I was in and out of AA/NA for almost ten years and counted days for so long that I became known as, 'Joe with one day back.' I wanted to stop more than anything, but I was absolutely powerless over it. It was as if I was trying to stop a train wreck with my mind, but the harder I tried to stop, the harder addiction beat me down. I tried living an ordinary life with heroin and used all my willpower to get and keep a job. Like most

addicts, I was always given another chance by others and bestowed great luck as I managed to get jobs that I was unqualified for and didn't deserve. I had given up on my Olympic dream and hated gymnastics as I thought it had betrayed me. I managed to get a job at the New York Times, which gave me a little confidence to try harder to quit using heroin. My best thinking finally had me go to their employee assistance program and I told the woman I was shooting heroin and wanted to quit. I thought I was going to get fired, but I didn't, they got me a scholarship to an inpatient rehab because I didn't have insurance. Even though this rehab was like all the others, I think I was ready to stop using and I finally began to listen to others. I had a huge ego that needed smashing and working with a counselor on my unmanageability showed me exactly who I was instead of who I thought I was. There are a few moments in our active addiction when we truly see ourselves for who we are and nothing is more humbling and terrifying. I knew I needed to listen and go after recovery because I was going to die if I didn't. I was desperate to change and knew that this was what they had called, 'the gift of desperation.' I did everything they told me to do and started to put down the things I wanted to do.

SL: Can you describe your path towards recovery?

JP: The first few months of recovery were very difficult for me because I had been medicating my feelings for so long that I wasn't used to living life without the powerful effects of opiates to support me. I had to endure a lot of uncomfortable months and it seemed like I had been withdrawing from heroin forever. I was told by others often not to quit before the miracle and I used to get aggravated because it didn't feel like a miracle...until it did. The moment I thought would never happen when I stopped obsessing about using and I finally felt a little better. It didn't happen all at once, but it did happen.

Once the obsession was lifted, I was able to focus more energy on the things I wanted to do. Even though it had been almost 9 years since I did gymnastics, I started doing it again because I missed it. I ended up leaving the New York Times and started auditioning for shows in New York City. I got a job performing on Broadway and for Cirque du Soleil. I didn't expect any of this to happen because I honestly didn't think it was possible for me to get sober.

SL: What has helped you maintain your sobriety?

JP: An important part of my own story that helps to maintain my sobriety is to never forget how sick I used to feel coming off drugs. Nothing on earth had ever broken me like drugs and alcohol had and remembering how bad I used to feel actually helps in this situation.

SL: What advice would you give to someone just beginning their steps towards recovery?

JP: Never give up! Recovery can take a long time and as addicts we want to feel better immediately. Sometimes the process can take a long time, but I think it's important to keep on trying no matter what. I also think it is important to remind people how much better they will eventually feel.

