

**** For the purpose of protecting those involved, I chose to publish this story on my website via a document with pseudonyms instead of its published form.**

Headline: Keeping Katie

Deck: A young adult battles with heroin addiction, a story all too common in Louisville.

Writers: Lucy Calderon and Cameron Daniel

Designer: Jess Mays

Photographer: Olivia Brotzge

In July, 2016 the Courier Journal (CJ) published an article about 23-year-old Katie Smith, a troubled girl who rediscovered herself through yoga.

A couple of months later this same woman talked to the CJ about a revitalizing drug that saved her life. Both stories were about a happily ever after.

But this is not that kind of story.

Her troubles began in high school.

Katie remembers shooting teachers with vodka-filled water guns, only hanging out with seniors, and making guest appearances in the recycling bins of random classrooms completely wasted.

“I did a lot of stupid things in high school. I showed up drunk more often than not,” Katie recalls. She was absent a lot, and it showed in high school yearbooks. Her yearbooks showed that she was active in the German Honors Society in ninth grade, but then she was neither pictured nor mentioned in tenth. Her junior year, dark circles are noticeable under her eyes. In her senior yearbook, she wasn’t pictured at all.

At 16, after two years of attending duPont Manual High School, Katie simply stopped showing up.

What happened to Katie Smith?

Katie’s father was enjoying an uneventful night in when his phone rang.

It was Katie. Her shaking voice began with, “Hey, all cards on the table, this is what’s happening.” She told him that she was calling him from jail, that she had been arrested for heroin possession. It was the first time in years Katie had been fully honest with her father, and all he could do was cry.

For four whole years, his little girl had been battling a life-threatening addiction, and he had no idea. Who could blame him? Hardly anyone knew what Katie was up to.

For years, Katie's parents and older sisters, Kim and Kallie, were in the dark. They knew there was a problem because Katie kept her distance, but they didn't know what until this phone call, two weeks after her 18th birthday.

When her school was under the assumption that she was enrolled in the Home/Hospital Institution program for a severe fish allergy, Katie wasn't even living at home. By age 16, she moved out because she simply couldn't get along with her parents. She was living in a rundown house with eight other young people in similar situations.

"I kind of made it the perfect atmosphere to get away with what I was doing," Katie said.

Her parents were divorced and had decided to give the \$1,000 monthly child support money directly to Katie. They never thought that this money could be funding her addiction.

Because she was juggling the severe stress of handling a relationship with her family while using heroin, Katie found it easier to run away.

"There was just a lot of questions being asked that I couldn't answer," Katie said, "it made a lot more sense to just remove myself from the situation than to continue to put up that front and that lie."

When they asked her what she did with her time, she couldn't tell them that she was spending hours in parking lots waiting for heroin dealers.

"I feel like most of my memories start after 21, so it's a reach."

Before heroin, Katie was a bright child with a love for journalism and art classes that "didn't feel like school."

Katie loved adventure. She went on road trips around the country with her father and sisters in search of the craziest roller coasters. She loved riding her skateboard, even though she never fully learned how to skate and broke six bones trying.

"She was very frisky, she was very sassy," said Kim, "and she was super sweet, like very detail oriented about things that you wouldn't think about."

"Deeply empathetic," added Kallie.

"I kind of fell out of everything."

Katie felt a disconnect with Katie when she was around 14 years old, coinciding with when she first used heroin.

Now that they know these weren't regular teenage problems, Katie's sisters have trouble recognizing her.

The summer before Katie turned 14, she began to hang out with older people she met at punk-rock shows around town. She began drinking, but drinking just wasn't enough.

The combination of sheer circumstance and the people she surrounded herself with created the perfect storm for addiction.

Katie dated an older man with ample means, someone she called a "trust-fund baby," who was able to provide for her addiction for the first few years she used.

During those fundamental years, the glamour of heroin distracted her from her problems. The feeling was something new and — at the time — exciting.

"It's like a warm blanket on a cold night," Katie said. "It's like a cure for all of your wounds. But it's not. It just makes everything worse."

Her addiction escalated throughout high school, but as she left behind her childhood, her addiction became less of a habit and more of a survival technique.

"It was like that constant fight to be okay," she said.

Heroin consumed her life, but the sacrifices Katie had to make for her addiction weren't enough to make her stop.

"It feels super survivalist," Katie said. "If I get pulled over, I don't have insurance, this isn't my car, and I have all this illegal stuff, but if I don't get pulled over, I get what I wanted."

Most media stories about people like Katie are based on recovery. The truth is, some don't get better.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, heroin-related deaths rose nearly [seven-fold in the United States](#) from 2002 to 2015. Kentucky is known as a hub for heroin dealers and users, and is ranked fifth in the country for fatal drug overdoses. The Center for Disease and Prevention reported that opioid-related deaths have risen in Kentucky to [33.5 per 100,000 people](#), and Jefferson County sits at the top of this deadly pyramid. [122 people](#) died of a heroin overdose in Jefferson County in 2016. Fayette County is the runner up with [48 deaths](#), less than half that of Jefferson.

Even with access to rehabilitation centers, the heroin epidemic in Louisville is so serious that it can easily suck people right back into dependence. According to The National Institute for Drug Addiction, the national relapse rate for heroin users is somewhere [between 40 and 60 percent](#).

Katie has taken away something from each of her rehab experiences – which have been more than she can count – but in the end it comes down to what a user does when they're on their own, away from the discipline of a detox program.

“My life was really good when I did what they said,” Katie said, “and then as soon as I stopped, it went to shit.”

Jail, to rehabilitation centers, to hospitals: this has been the constant cycle of Katie’s life for 10 years. She dreams of a day when she is blessed with stability. A house. A job. A life without heroin.

“That's all life was. Just trying to stay well.”

At her lowest point, Katie’s only motivator was the cash tips she made working at restaurants. As soon as she had enough money, she would leave to buy heroin. She lived in her car, but heroin left her with no money for gas. Katie described it as always working for money, always stealing money, but never having money. Sometimes even when she earned hundreds of dollars in one day, it would all feed into one thing: her addiction.

Heroin was not an escape to Katie anymore. Her body grew so physically dependent on the drug that the only way she could feel normal was by using. If she didn’t use, she was severely sick with withdrawal.

“That's all life was. Just trying to stay well, which really is the most infuriating thing because you're not even getting what you're working for,” said Katie, “You're just not puking on yourself. You're just trying to get by.”

The only seemingly plausible way for Katie to escape from this nightmare was to simply not wake up. “I didn’t wanna be sick. But I couldn’t keep using.” she said, “Life is too hard with it, life is too hard without it, but I can’t do anything in between.”

The thought of ending her life became more and more realistic. She attempted suicide multiple times. “I’m really lucky to be alive, but you don't see it like that,” Katie said. “You're like, ‘Goddammit, I woke up,’ because you're that close to it just being over.”

Katie recalled waking up in an ambulance after overdosing. She was furious.

Her feelings overpowered her conscience as she threw herself at the paramedic that had saved her. She attacked him for saving her life. She hadn’t wanted to wake up.

The paramedic filed assault charges against Katie.

At least a dozen times Katie has woken up in an ambulance with Narcan, a drug administered to revive overdose patients, pulsing through her veins.

“It happens so frequently that you take it for granted,” Katie said.

“After high school it just got really bad.”

Though she took her recoveries for granted at first, her view changed when her long-time friend Raven Mears died after a heroin overdose.

“Seeing how it affected her family and the community and the ripples in the water, it's really heavy. It's been like four years and her mom still calls me crying,” Katie said.

The pain of her friend's death helped Katie realize how precious life is, and it terrifies her that she could be in Mears' position.

She can't imagine putting her family through any more trauma. It gets to the point where on the rare occasions she sees her parents, they cry.

“My mom and dad will sit down with me and they'll just both cry.”

Even though her parents don't always know how to help, they do what they can. For instance, they pay for her rehabilitation.

“My dad said that me going to rehab was more expensive than my sister going to law school,” she recalled. “My addiction has been more expensive than if I was just normal and had completed anything.” Katie's family life has become so stressed that it's difficult to spend time together. She cannot even recall the last time she spent a holiday with her family outside of rehab, jail, or a hospital.

“Rehab makes sense. It's the promised land.”

Even in what seems like a dark story, there are glimmers of hope for Katie. A few months ago, after being separated for weeks, Katie got an invitation from her sister Kallie to play music with her. Soon after, she went swimming with her other sister Katie. After years of ups and downs, and despite the energy these experiences took from the siblings, these moments made Katie think that maybe things could be better again.

Katie's hope to reconnect with her family has been a factor in pushing her towards rehabilitation. Her favorite center is in Los Angeles, and the program has thankfully admitted her within the year for another try at sober living. The program allows Katie to enjoy activities that she would rarely be able to experience back home. She hikes, draws, makes friends. Almost all of her current friendships were made in rehab.

For Katie, life is better while she's in recovery, but it becomes too much to handle back home. Katie believes that if she stays in Louisville much longer, she may die. She can't handle staying in a place with such awful memories along with high levels of heroin access.

Katie is just one of countless people who continue to suffer from heroin's grip on Louisville. But for Katie, there could be hope.

So again, Katie will attend a rehabilitation center in hopes of finally getting better. Again, Katie will try to discover her interests she never got to experience because of heroin. And again, she will pray that this will be the last time she has to go through rehab.