

## Charles

UHC: I was wondering if you could tell us how you came to become homeless?

Charles: Well, let's see, I...I used intravenous opiates. I started back in 1990, or 1992. I stopped using drugs all together, oh, I'd say in about 1999. In 1997, my father was diagnosed with colon cancer and my mother asked me if I would move in with her and my father to help her care for him. By then, I'd been off drugs for about 5 years when she asked me this, so it got a lot better. Instead of saying you can't come here anymore, she actually invited me into the house, and so I got the chance to do some truly healing stuff with my dad. I took care of him.

Anyway, our relationship got really...it just got really good. So, in June of 1999, my mother gets a brain aneurism and she dies, and then my father, he dies in August of that same year of colon cancer, and I was looking at the death of both of my parents and the pain medication they were giving my father, oxycotin, every time they'd go up in dosage, we'd put the other, you know, somewhere else, and we kept everything on the kitchen table so he could get to it easily when he needed to, and after looking at his medication for a couple of weeks, it started looking like my medication. And after a couple of weeks, I started using his pain medication, because I love opiates. So, instead of having to go into a dark alleyway to do drugs, all I had to do was go to the kitchen table.

After we buried my father, I tried to detox, and I thought it would be like trying to detox myself over him. After a couple of days I had have the shakes and the shivers, like a bad flu, and after three weeks I was still detoxing. I got a little crazy, and I got into a fight. I put somebody in the hospital and I went to jail. I got out of jail, and I guess my father had left the house in my name and my sister's name, my older sister's name. She said she was moving into the house, and she didn't want me there, and I was so...I just didn't care much about anything by then. So, I said cool, I couldn't fight with her, so I left and that began my homeless...my homelessness, and I went to a homeless shelter in New Haven, Connecticut, that's where I was, Connecticut, and I went to several of them. I got progressively worse, and went into a few mental institutions, The Yale Psychiatric Institute, and...what was it called... I'm going a little fuzzy, but that's alright.

So, as time went around, somewhere around 2000 or 2001, I started to come to my senses again. The five years when I was clean, I had done a lot of volunteer work, volunteering where I'd go to jails and detoxing and stuff, talk to adults about addiction, and since I realized that I had been to those same places, jails and hospitals and stuff doing volunteer work, I started trying to get a job. I was volunteering for agencies, and volunteering for this place that wanted to start a home and out-patient drug program for people who had slipped through the cracks, people in the projects mostly. And they paid for my rent so I could stay in a rooming house, while I worked for them.

I finally did get a job for an agency that was taking men out of homeless shelters and putting them in temporary transitional housing. They had dual diagnosis; they had mental health issues too, and drug dependency. I started feeling like a regular person again...I stopped taking my depression medication, and I was feeling good. I had been working all of my life, and I enjoyed working; working made me feel good. I was doing double shifts, and one time I did a triple shift. They were having a hard time keeping a director for the program so I was covering shifts. I feel asleep one morning 15 minutes before my

boss was due in and so I got fired from that job because I was the only staff on the premises, and that was a no-no; something you didn't do.

So, anyway, when I lost that job, I couldn't pay rent anymore, and I had to leave the rooming house where I was staying, and so I was homeless again - this was 2004. With all the pressure I was back in, I attempted suicide twice, in the same month. The first time, I was sent out of the hospital ward. The second time, I was in the hospital ward, and I was scared; I didn't want to go back out on the street. So, I said, why don't you send me to a managed drug program, and that would keep me off the street, and give me 90 days to find something, so, I graduated from that program in 90 days, and I was feeling better about myself, and something in me said it was time to leave New Haven, and I started travelling throughout Connecticut, going to different cities and staying in different shelters, and sometime in 2005, I had a baby sister that was living down in Greenville, because Greenville was between Atlanta, and... someplace in North Carolina...

UHC: Charlotte?

Charles: Charlotte. So that is might be a good, solid building up, and you know, there was a lot of money in the area, and it might be a good idea to come down here and try and find some work. I got down here and things weren't all that I was told they were, and I found where my sister was taking oxycotin, and she wasn't paying her bills and people were coming by her house to repossess stuff, and shut off notices where coming in the mail and she finally had to leave the apartment she was in, and you know, it wasn't...I had started taking her oxycotins too..

So, I decided it wouldn't be a good idea for me to move with her; I couldn't start reliving the same old junky living, so I went into the Greenville Rescue Mission, it's a Christian based shelter. I was here for a year, and in that year on August 6th...from August 6th to August 9th of this year, I was able to take advantage of the structure that they have there, a great structure. It was unlike any shelter I had been in before...it was like, morning chapel, evening chapel ...we worked at a warehouse, and we received donations, you know, clothes and furniture and stuff, and I kind of liked the idea of working again, it make me feel good.

I wasn't getting any income or anything but it was paying my room and board at the mission. I began taking my medication seriously, and taking it on a regular basis, and I could see a difference in me, you know. I wasn't...I wasn't... my behavior wasn't pushing people away from me. People were actually enjoying me and stuff. People started liking me, you know, and it was different, and I kind of liked it. So, I started acting like a different person, you know, I started smiling at people, you know, and shaking their hands, and telling them stuff like "God bless you," and "have a nice day." At first, it was like a defense mechanism, because they were real strict, and they would kick you out, you know, like that, you know. So, you know, I wanted to be in with the staff. I didn't want them to kick me out and end up on the street, but then I got used to being like that; I wanted to be like that. Before I knew it I was doing my own personal Bible studies, I was praying for people I didn't like, and so my behavior started changing toward people, I started...excuse my language, instead of saying "fuck you," I started saying "what you did hurt me and I'll pray for you." Like, it just became clear to me that a change was needed in my life, and a change was taking place. And, I started talking to this guy... I kind of

avoided him at first. His name was Mike Stevens, and we started sitting around talking, and I think it was what I needed, to sit around with someone and tell them how I was feeling, and what I was thinking. I felt him out for a while. I wasn't quite sure if I could trust him with what I was thinking. He let me read a book of his...I like reading, you know.

UHC: Yeah.

Charles: And I like...I respect books, you know. I don't lend them out easily, and when he did that, it kind of let me know...I took it as a sign that I could trust him, so, anyways, it was a kind of controversial book too, you know, and so I read it and we started talking, and I was telling him that I felt like it was time for me to start moving on and I started getting notes from the staff, you know, "Do you have plans to move on from here?" And, man, two weeks later, after I told Mike what was going on, they asked me if I wanted to move into a house on Bagwell circle. I'm from Connecticut, I didn't know what Bagwell circle was...or what kind of house they were going to move me into, but it was... when they brought me by here I was dumbfounded. I was I hadn't lived in a place this nice for years, you know, since...that was my own, since I was sharing a condo with a teacher before my parents asked me to move in with them. We had a nice place, you know, but it was like ten years since I had a place like this. I really wasn't expecting this, you know. I was expecting that I was going to have to make a list of, you know, this has to be fixed and this has to be fixed. It was new, man. The furniture was new. Everything was newly painted and it had central air. But I'm here now, and God blessed me with a club house, which is right up the street, and I can go to meetings there everyday at noon, the mental health van picks me up from there, and I go back over to the mental health center, from 1 to 4:30 in the afternoon, and then I come home. You know, it's kind of nice.

UHC: How would you, if you don't mind me asking, how would you get into drugs in the first place?

Charles: 1970, I was in this program called Teen Leadership Institute of all things, and we were on a weekend...like a weekend retreat, and a place called [inaudible] House. It is on the border of Connecticut and New York State. There was this girl that I was kind of, like, attracted to, and I guess after one of the meetings, one of the groups we were in, she said, "Come up to my room." I thought she wanted to be alone with me, and she turned me on to some heroin. I snorted heroin for a long time; for about 10 years after that. You know, it was, I guess, for economic reasons. I had a real phobia of needles, but after having to snort 3 bags to someone having to shoot half a bag and getting the same high, I started paying for other people to inject it, and then for economic reasons, I started injecting it myself. So, that's how I got involved with opiates.

UHC: So, you said, that was the pivotal moment, I guess, when you were on that retreat?

Charles: Yeah, I've had this skin condition, all my life, since I was born, and I was always a little chubby, you know, and girls just didn't give me attention, and when I started using opiates, I was in with a new crowd. Women would pay attention to me...to what I could

offer them mostly, you know, but I kind of liked it. I knew it, you know, I knew that I was being chased, you know, for that, but I accepted it because it gave me access to people. I was kind of shy. I didn't know how to mix with people in general. When I was high off opiates, I was just the coolest, the smoothest, you know, in my mind. In my head I was the smoothest, coolest guy around, you know.

At first, it was real fun, but it was like, the party was over, real quick, you know. I think the party was over for me in 1979, you know. So, in 1986, I was still doing it, you know. Other people had either died or went to jail, had caught the A.I.D.S virus, well H.I.V., or they had moved on to other things; they had stopped. You know, they were like raising families, or going to college, and were paying car notes, or worrying about paying their children's tuition, and I was still running into allies, and sticking my money through a hole in the door, hoping that they would pass drugs out to me, and until 1986, when I went into my first treatment center. I went into about 7 or 8 treatment centers between '86 and '92.

What started out as a party was...man, it was hard work. It was hard work. Steal enough money to support my habit, while working, mind you, all this time I was working. You know, I had a job, and you know, I was like working two or three jobs, to support my habit, so...man, it was a sense of freedom when I stopped using in 1992. But, I hadn't changed. You know, my thinking hadn't changed. I was still manipulating people. I was still lying. I was still cheating. I was still doing all the things that I did when I was using drugs; I just wasn't using drugs anymore. So, it was no wonder that, you know, when my parents asked me to move in with them, I thought I was cured. I thought I'd never use drugs again. I saw what happened to my life and the lives of other people.

It was okay to go and get my father's oxycotin, and give him what he needed and put it back where I had gotten it from. I thought I was grown up. I was taking care of my father. I was being a blessing to them instead of being a curse. But, like I said, after I buried them, it was like I was lost, with nobody to take care of me. I didn't know a whole lot about taking care of myself. And being alone in the house, my brightest idea was taking my father's pain medication. So, I was back on the merry-go-round, and homelessness wasn't something I read about or listened to on the evening news. I was getting first hand experience with it, and I tell you it was quite a shock, I tell you. I was homeless for several months before I realized. I was sitting on a milk crate in an empty parking lot, you know, and I thought "Wow, I'm homeless."

It was strange, but I got used to it real quick. Like I got over my fear of needles, I got used to being homeless. I just learned. I watched what people did. I listened to conversations that were going on around me and I found out; I can go here and get some coffee, and I can go here and get a lunch, and I can go here and get dinner, and on Wednesday nights the even pass out slacks at this place, you know. It was nothing for me to sleep on a park bench, and wake up with rats scurrying around me, you know. I had a real fear of rats at one time, but I...I guess I can get used to anything, you know. So, I'm the guy that beat out 300 other guys to get a scholarship to a prep school when I was thirteen. I was a Catholic school momma's boy that turned into a dope fiend.

UHC: So, the person that you were, when you were that guy, that beat out 300 or something for that scholarship; when did that change from you being that guy, to you

being the dope fiend, to you now? Or, I guess, how would you describe yourself then, and now, and then in the middle?

Charles: Drugs. I was one of three black students at this all boys school, and I really got this idea in my head that my parents didn't want, and that's why they sent me away. You know, there were people coming to the showers, where I was showering, to see if niggers really grew tails at night. You know, it was just strange. I didn't like it. I had never been away from home and I didn't like these people. This other black kid, from Atlanta, he was sniffing glue. This guy...this white guy I really liked, he lived in the dorm room next to me, he was from California, he's father was sending him ounces of pot, you know, and we'd go up on the roof of the school and smoke pot. I had a little bit of a moustache at the time and I could go into a liquor store and buy a bottle of wine. I mean man, I was sniffing glue, smoking pot, and drinking wine, and I was like, the Black Panthers is happening, there was a lot of turmoil back then because it was like 1968, and I thought I was missing out.

So, I begged...I begged my father to not send me back. It was my sophomore year, and he wasn't hearing it, and he was just like, "You're going back!" So, in schools like that they have an honor code, you know, so one day, I played for the basketball team, and I thought, if I stole something they'd have to kick me out and my father couldn't send me back. See these bright ideas I was getting? I was a smart guy. You know, I was always coming up with all these great ideas. So, I took this guy's wallet, and then I gave it back, and he had to turn me in, you know. My father and the headmaster, you know, they kind of figured out what was going on, and they said, well, you're going to finish out the year, but after the year you can leave and we won't, you know, keep a record of this. So, I was happy with that. The problem was what I learned in that one year took me through the next two years of public high school. I didn't have to study man. The kind of teachers and the kind of academic programs; I was just acing tests without even studying, so in the time that I would usually be studying, I was hanging out and tripping on acid, and smoking pot, and thumbing my nose at the school. I was getting bombed at student walkouts, Black Panther rallies, Communist Party rallies, and this and that. I was having a ball, but I wasn't learning. I graduated high school with a quarter of a credit to spare. I started working. I kept putting off college.

UHC: Could you tell us about a typical day you would have when you were homeless, and maybe we could talk about a typical day you have now that you live in this home?

Charles: A typical day, well in Connecticut, they woke you up in the shelter about 5:30. They would give us cold cereal. If you were lucky you got a cup of coffee; if you got around early enough. I'd wander around until the library opened up, and then I'd go to the library and go online, read, and wash up and change my clothes in the bathroom. I'd find a corner store that would allow me to buy cigarettes with my food stamps, which usually meant I was paying double, for the abuse of the food stamps. Then I'd just wander around until 4 or 4:30, when the shelter would let us back in again. I'd take a shower, I'd take dinner, and then they'd let us watch an hour or so of T.V., go to bed, get up in the morning, and start all over again. Here, I go to bed when I want to. I like to look out...I usually get up around...hmm...it's difficult for me to sleep through the night because I'm

used to sleeping with, like, 90 people. You know, it's like, it's just me, and so I'll get up every couple of hours.

I need some iced tea [gets up and goes into kitchen for medication and drink]. I'm doing good with this medication that I'm taking. I can talk now and I'm usually coughing my lungs out. I feel relief. I have heart failure... congestive heart failure from sleeping out on park benches. So, I usually don't talk a whole lot...it's this coffee too. But, after sleeping 2 or 3 hours at a time, I usually sleep until 6 or 6:30 in the morning, depending on what I have to do. I'll turn on the news, to one of the news channels, make a cup of coffee, and just read. I'll say my prayers. I've turned into... this is not how I've always been...I don't know if it's obsessive-compulsive or what, but I'll just start cleaning. I'll start vacuuming, and wiping stuff down, and washing dishes, and checking the windows and see if there's smudges on the windows and stuff. It's crazy, man, because I never used to be like that before. I mean, I wasn't a total slob, but now it's like... I don't know, but it makes me feel good. They can't lock me up for being a clean fiend, you know, so I do stuff like that. I rearrange the pillows on the couches, and make sure the pictures are in the right position, you know, and that the bottoms are lined up with the cracks in the floor.

It's strange, man. I used to have a girlfriend that was like that, and it used to kill me, man. I hated it, man. But, you know, that's what I do, and then I get ready, you know. I take a bath, if I need a bath, and get dressed, and go to my new NA meeting down the street.

Then, the mental health center picks me up from there at 1, and I stay there until 4:30. We do all kinds of cool, nifty things. We'll draw a picture of, say, they'll say, here's the background, now put yourself in there in the picture somewhere, or we'll sit around and talk about our medication, you know, or substance abuse or we'll watch a DVD.

Sometimes they'll take us...they do some nice stuff...one time they took us to the botanical gardens down at Clemson. They took us to the war museum in downtown Greenville. They took us to this African-American museum last week. Once a month they'll take us to this place called Golden Corral, and I think...I don't know...I think sometimes it's like replacement. I keep ice cream in the freezer, pumpkin, Edy's pumpkin ice cream, but when I get that feeling I want to go out and cruise around... there's a lot going on down the street, you know.

Sometimes my disease will talk to me, and it will say, just go down and see what's going on down the street, just go down and see who's down there, you know. And when I get that urge, I just start eating ice cream. Sometimes I can eat a lot of ice cream before that urge passes, you know, but I figure it's a better trade off. So, sometimes I might come home and prep some chicken, you know, cut up some garlic, and throw it in a pan with some peppers and onions. I do some writing. I like...I enjoy writing and I keep a journal. I've been keeping a journal since 2004 and I like writing about what I'm thinking, you know, and what I'm feeling. And that way, it helps me deal with the loneliness.

I'm not always lonely, but when I am, you know, it like grabs me by the throat, you know. It helps me deal with that, and it also keeps my emotions from sneaking up on me, and, you know, ganging up on me. I get to see them a little more objectively, you know. When I was lonely before, you know, it meant that I'd go outside and find somebody. I'm an addict, you know, and it's dangerous for me. I don't pick out the best people to be with, you know. As a matter of fact, you know, I have a history of picking the wrong people to be with. So, I need to find ways to deal with that... to deal with that that are safe.

So, I write and I read and I pray. I'll be honest with you, prayer is my best friend. It's been my salvation. My contact with someone who loves me, all the time, and deeply, you know, and wants the best for me. Sometimes, when I'm alone, I'll just get on my knees and cry, and say "Please, Lord, will you just send me somebody to keep me company, or just help me get through this?" He does one or the other, you know. Someone will come by and say, "Hey, do you want to come to a meeting?" Or, he'll give me the strength to get through the moment. I haven't used drugs since August 16th, 2006.

UHC: Oh, wow.

Charles: I got this at a convention in Spartanburg, a couple of weeks ago. I didn't have anyway to get there, because I don't have an income, but this guy said, come with me, so we went up there and so, that's kind of what I try to do with my days. I try to have a...some structure for myself. If I start veering away from the structure, I know you've got to do this; you've got to try this. I kind of like structure. I was always a rebel, and structure and authority was something I fought. I had to be 53 to start growing up, but I thank God for who I am, and what I've gone through, because it's brought me here. Here isn't such a bad place. I've got people in my corner. I'm not running from anybody; not bill collectors. I'm not sticking needles in my arm, you know. I'm working through some self forgiveness. I don't know, it's just given me some kind of peace in my life, and I go to these meetings, man, and people have stuff in their lives that is miserable, man, miserable. They get married and have kids, and they're miserable, man. They have two cars, and they're miserable. You know, and I don't have any of that stuff. If I have to ask someone for a couple of quarter so I can make a phone call, it's alright, I've had to ask for more than that. I remember asking someone to give me some money so I could pay my rent, you know. There are things I'm okay with, you know. I'm okay with taking the bus. I've got every name; from the Upstate Homeless Coalition, to the Greenville Mental Health Center, from the miserable people at all the meetings. But, you know, the least I can learn from this is how not to live.

Plus there are people just like me. I had...my partner in crime; she used to shoot up in the neck. We made a good partnership, you know, as far as supporting our habit, but in 1992, we both stopped. She died clean. She died clean. She had the H.I.V. virus and it progressed to the point where she was taking eight or nine medications a day. She said it was the medications that were making her sick, so she just stopped taking them. You know, I no longer ask, why not me? For some reason, God wants me around. He wants me around, because I was diagnosed with it, see, and when it came time for me to take treatments, they took my blood, and they couldn't find any of that virus in my system. I got diagnosed with H.I.V., I got diagnosed with Hep-C. I've just stared down the barrel of a gun many times. I guess it just took all of that for me to see that it was just something that I had to do. I'm open to a lot of things, you know, if people want to come by and take me, it's cool, you know. I've got secrets, you know, but good secrets. I'm working on... I'm trying to put together a curriculum for a courtesy based drug rehab. I've come a long way, and there's a lot of good stuff. You're the first two people I've told about that. I don't talk about it, you know, because it's my thing. I want something to leave them, you know, for when I'm gone. I want something more for groups than just coming home and

watching T.V. That's a good secret, you know. I don't have any secrets that would embarrass me, you know.

UHC: In five years, do you want to be here, you know, be just as you are, or are there things you want to work on?

Charles: Five years. Man, and keep in mind, I'm not thinking about how much stuff I can accumulate in the next five years, so, what I hope to be in the next five years...God's will...I hope to be still in the church that I am now, but what I'd like to be doing...What I'd like to be doing is going over to the rescue mission and running a Bible study on Wednesday night, you know. I'd like to have enough confidence, you know, to do something like that. In five years, I'd like a little dog too. The cats...it's my fault, I put out a bowl of milk and they come. I'd like to be doing what I was doing at my last job, you know. Taking the guys to meetings, you know, piling them in the van and taking them to meetings in other cities, taking them to their appointments. I was helping them with their chores. I like that kind of job. I'd like to be taking some classes at Greenville Tech, you know, substance abuse treatment, and how to be, you know, a mentor. I could help people with their health issues. Sometimes, it's so sad, mental issues. I mean, I have depression, but some people, they hear voices, man. I don't know, five years from here? I'm just living day to day.

Five years from now is...I'd like to be drug free, and maybe taking a bus to Atlanta, to where my son is in school. He's 6'6" and wants to play professional ball. Both of my sons, man. My older son is working as a radiologist, paid his way through medical school, and my younger wants to play for the NBA. You know, I see my sons and I think, "Thank God for mothers!" You know? Because I wasn't around; they want to be productive members of society. They are not at all attracted to the wild side of life. They're good boys, you know.

UHC: How old are they?

Charles: My oldest son is 30, and my youngest is 19.

UHC: Would you have advice for someone who found himself in a similar situation as yourself.

Charles: A similar situation as today?

UHC: Well, when you were homeless.

Charles: Let go of your mistakes. If you don't know how to let go of your mistakes, you know, you'll live in shame, and then you're stuck. No matter how many times other people forgive you, if you don't forgive yourself, there's no progress. Oh, and don't be afraid to ask for help! I guess I'd like you to know that there's nothing special about me. I'm just like anyone else out there, and we all have the chance. We're not all made equally, some people are born into better situations than others, but I think we all have the opportunity to say, I don't want to do this anymore. I mean, you see it all the time,

people that spend their whole lives in the penitentiary, to one day write a book, to become a movie star, you know, that get out and stop going back. For a long time, I blamed it on other people, and it wasn't until I took responsibility for the situation...I didn't change; my perspective on life changed. My perspective on life changed, you know, so I started looking at me the way other people were looking at me, you know. I was no longer...I stopped looking at myself as homeless, you know, and when I leave this place, I can never say I'm homeless again.

Do I have a job? I have a very important job, I have to stay clean on a daily basis, everyday, and I don't get a day off. You know, it's a twenty-four hour job. So, I don't look at myself as like other people look at me. You know, I've got just as many problems as other people have got, you know, what am I going to eat tonight, you know, am I going to eat tonight? People have problems with their children; I have problems with my children. People have problems with other people; I have problems with other people, you know. I'm not special, you know, I'm not...I'm not sure what I'm trying to say. There a lot of people out there that are grateful for what I can give them, and can use what I can give them. I just wish people could get what I have, you know. Even my ex-roommate, I tried to work with him, you know. I didn't snitch on him, you know, I tried to talk to him, but he wasn't willing...he wasn't willing to change.