

Note to readers:

“Often, whether we are members of the public or journalists, we hear about the tragedy after the fact. In this case, I saw it unfold.”



GABOR DEGRE | BDN

Erin Rhoda interviews Garrett Brown on July 30, 2015, at Kennebec County jail in Augusta.

“If this changes one kid’s life, saves one kid from being in jail, saves his family the pain of seeing him go through it, saves one kid from overdosing and dying, then all that I’ve done hasn’t been in vain.”

— Garrett

Content notice: This article contains adult language and drug references, and may not be suitable for young readers.

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BDN MAINE FOCUS

Maine Focus is a journalism and community engagement initiative at the Bangor Daily News.

BY ERIN RHODA, MAINE FOCUS EDITOR

I met Garrett Brown in the summer of 2013 — at a 5K of all places. He was one of several young men from Mountain View Youth Development Center in Charleston who walked the race in Dexter to show their support for ending domestic violence. The facility often brought its residents into the community to involve them in positive activities and get them ready for their release. Garrett, who was 18 then, had six days left at Mountain View.

He was open about his background when I talked to him at the event. His honesty was refreshing — and rare. So I asked him out of the blue if I could follow him through his reintegration, to show the public what the transition is like for young people. We could

take it one day, one month, one year at a time. He could always change his mind. He said yes. So began our journey.

Garrett opened up his life to me, and the public, by allowing me to follow him for what turned out to be two and a half years. Through some of the hardest times in his life, he shared his missteps and dreams.

Later, he told me why he stuck with it. He doubted telling his story would change much, but he had just enough hope left. Maybe he could make up for everything by helping someone else. Maybe his life could be a message.

This is for him.

Augusta, Maine • Feb. 20, 2015

The shed was barely tall enough to stand in and had no windows. Yet Garrett Brown folded himself inside and used an empty plastic pen to give himself his reward: two lines of heroin, each less than half a gram.

Garrett, 20, had started college at last. His mother, Traci Brown, drove him to South Portland — about 75 miles from her home one way — for classes, but he told her he didn’t need a ride that day. He’d been so good. He’d finally found a place to live in Portland, so he could be closer to school, and was moving in a few days. He hadn’t been doing heroin as frequently. It would be his treat. Two friends joined him in the shed.

He was always coming so close — to having the life he wanted, but also to dying. Perhaps his tolerance had decreased when he wasn’t using, or the drug was stronger than usual this time. Whatever it was, he stopped breathing. One friend slipped away.

But the other stayed to call 911. A dispatcher told her how to do cardiopulmonary resuscitation, and she kept Garrett alive, her hands pumping his heart.

One hour earlier, Garrett’s aunt Trudy Kopyc had crossed the backyard and didn’t notice anyone there. All was quiet. Suddenly, police were knocking on her door, saying they were responding to a possible overdose. She didn’t know what they were talking about. When she stepped outside, she saw an emergency crew hauling Garrett around the corner of the house, holding him by the arms and legs.

A paramedic administered naloxone, which reverses the effects of an opioid overdose, and Garrett woke up in the ambulance, shaking with cold. His teeth were chattering so hard the paramedic couldn’t get a thermometer in his mouth. Someone asked him if he knew what had happened.

At that moment, he didn’t remember. He didn’t remember doing heroin. He didn’t even know he was in Augusta. All he felt at that second was the horror and pain of being alive. And guilt.