

Basu: Motherhood motivated her to finally kick meth



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(Photo: Rekha Basu)

Erin Blume of West Des Moines is a lively, witty, self-assured 37-year-old, an adoring, attentive mother and a recovering meth addict and former dealer.

Unsavoury as the juxtaposition of meth and motherhood is, public officials are finally recognizing we can't condemn or imprison our way to ending addiction. Sometimes it takes punishment, but first it takes treatment.

Nothing in Blume's childhood propelled her to addiction. There were no addicted parents, no abuse. She says she had "the best childhood," raised by loving and supportive parents in tiny Charter Oak. It was boredom and a spirit of defiance that drove her to drugs. "I was just naughty, goddammit," said Blume, who has retained the salty language, if not the other vices.

Everyone needs their own motivation for getting and staying sober. For Blume, that is the chubby-faced, golden-haired, blue-eyed baby named Casey, whom she learned she was in carrying in jail. She said she has never used since.

When Hillary Clinton was doing listening tours in rural Iowa and New Hampshire before announcing for president, a top concern she heard from voters was substance abuse, specifically meth and heroin. She heard it so often, she came up with a \$10 billion proposal to combat it (http://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/06/01/hillary-clinton-focuses-on-drug-addiction-after-learning-scale-of-problem/?_r=1). This is significant because, to the extent that the drug epidemic has featured in election campaigns, the impetus was crack and crime in the 1980s and early '90s. Candidates, including Bill Clinton, were elected vowing to be tough on drugs. Bill Clinton kept that promise.

But decades later, communities and policymakers — including Bill Clinton's spouse — are recognizing that harsh mandatory minimums linked to the war on drugs have only helped fill prisons and create a permanent underclass of ex-offenders. Hillary Clinton found that 65 percent of federal and state inmates have substance abuse problems, and should be in treatment. Her plan focuses on rehabilitation for nonviolent drug offenses and collaboration between public health and criminal justice officials. For every dollar a state committed to addiction programs, the federal government would commit \$4.

But maybe Clinton's most important contribution is urging people to think about addiction as a disease rather than as a moral failing.

Blume was 35 when she was arrested that time in June 2014. She had already lost custody of one child because of her drug habit. Now pregnant again, she was looking at up to 75 years in prison. By then she had been addicted to meth for 15 years, and before that, to alcohol for about seven years.

When asked how often she was getting high before that last arrest, Blume stared at me as if she didn't understand the question. But it was I who didn't understand: She never came down from it. "I never had a day I didn't use until I was in cuffs," she said. "It cost me my whole life." That and \$200 a day. So she took to dealing.



Erin Blume with her son, Casey, whom she credits with getting her off meth. (Photo: Rekha Basu)

She married young and only after getting pregnant with her first son, who is now 14. (They have since become close again). She quit using while pregnant but started again when he was 2. The marriage ended the following year.

The meth made her "very irresponsible and always sidetracked," she said. "I couldn't keep a job or look for one. I was very rude."

Her parents begged her to stop. "I never put anybody else first. It was always me, me, me." In 2009 she went through treatment again, staying clean a year. But she was back in jail in 2014. With the help of Broadlawn hospital, she got into Prelude Behavioral Services drug treatment center, where she stayed 30 days as an inpatient. That was followed by 90 days at the 17-bed Bernie Lorenz Recovery House in Des Moines, a halfway house for women in recovery. Her treatment was covered by Medicaid.

But there were still criminal charges, so her parents hired her a good lawyer, who got her into the drug court diversion program. As the court required, she did six more months as an outpatient at Prelude. About a third of

the 5,000 addicts who go through treatment each year are women, according to Prelude CEO Ron Berg. But women make up half the patients who abuse drugs other than alcohol.

When she started treatment in 2014, Blume says she had never felt more hopeless. But she was determined not to give birth in prison, or to an addicted child. Instead of berating her, the counselors "made you feel worthy," she said. In group sessions, addicts also praised and supported each other.

Though alcohol has been the primary drug of choice, since 2008 meth has shot up to the No. 1 drug for 25 percent of patients admitted to inpatient treatment programs in Iowa. The median age of incoming clients (male and female) has inched up from 27 in 1999 to 33 in 2013. That's according to a 16-year study (1999 to 2013) by the Iowa Consortium for Substance Abuse Research and Evaluation.

Blume says she's the only one from her group who hasn't fallen off the wagon since leaving treatment. She said one of the women she was with at Bernie Lorenz was Tosha Hyatt, the 32-year-old mother of four killed recently, along with two officers, riding in a police car. The accident was caused by a young drunken driver, who also died.

Blume and her boyfriend live together; both work and share caring for Casey. "I enjoy and appreciate every little thing that he does," she says of her son.

Still spunky and irreverent, she finds support from Alcoholics Anonymous and church. "I finally, for once, feel successful in my life," she says. The charges against her haven't gone away but if she obeys the law, she can stay out of prison.

No one would recommend having a baby as a quitting-drug strategy. But Blume sees her son as a gift from God, presented on "the very worst day in my life." A gift worth staying sober for.



Erin Blume and her son, Casey (Photo: Rekha Basu)