

## My Journey from Homelessness to the 2023 Boston Marathon

First, I'd like to thank you all for taking the time to hear my story. To start, my name is Matthew Norton, I've been working for The Mercantile since the very beginning. I was already very familiar with Broadway Hospitality Group as I worked at Lucy's American Tavern for 5 years and some of you may know the owners of Lucy's were all part of the Tavern in the Square family. The Mercantile has been a wonderful new adventure for me. I started as a server and quickly worked my way up to bartending. I love my job and I love this bar. It's provided me with a level of stability and also has given me amazing new relationships that have significantly improved my life. In just a few months, the time working here has allowed me to showcase the best parts of my personality and have given me a level of confidence in who I am and what I am capable of.

Today I would describe myself as kind, optimistic, empathetic, friendly, hard-working, brave, courageous, bold, ambitious, persistent, passionate, etc. There are numerous adjectives I could use to describe the man I've become. But I wasn't always this way. And in fact, the character described above is a result of somebody who has traveled a dark road. As a young adult, I had a penchant for the partying lifestyle. During my college years and early twenties, it sort of became my identity. I was the fun one, the people friends would call for a wild night. And I believed that was enough. As years went by, the calls for fun and wild nights dwindled down. My friends were growing further into adulthood, while I stayed where I was. Soon enough, the drinking switched to drug use, and the drugs only got harder and harder. And then finally, I had been introduced to crystal meth.

It's hard to imagine how lost in one's life you'd have to be to say yes to your first time smoking crystal meth, but that's where I was. I was lost. No identity, no future, no drive, just a confused man in his mid-twenties looking for an escape from reality. Immediately I was hooked. Just after my first try, I found a dealer, and soon it became my life. For the next year, I'd work during the day, come home and smoke meth all night. Some nights alone, some nights with random people I met on a hookup app. I'd smoke until it was time to get ready for work. And I'd go days without sleep. I managed until it became unmanageable. I broke down eventually and revealed my dark secret to family and friends, and we banded together to find me the help I needed. I'd go to my first detox, then a 28 day rehab program. I came out thinking, I'm cured, it was a bad year, I'll be okay. But I left rehab the same lost and scared person I was when I went in.

After my experience, a couple months went by, and I relapsed, quietly. Nobody knew. This time, I was introduced to shooting it. I will tell you right now, the needle is what brought me to my knees. It wasn't long before people could tell that I wasn't okay. And soon enough it was time to go back to rehab. Except I wasn't ready. So I ran away. I lived out of my car for three months, driving up and down the east coast finding other meth users. Thankfully, a dear friend came and found me in a meth lab, called every resource he had, and got me back to rehab. At this point, I've lost my job, most of my family and friends have written me off until I was to genuinely and sincerely take this seriously. I went to a 90 day rehab program and moved into a halfway house from there. I did well. Not because I wanted to get well, but because I knew all the right things to say.

In the halfway house, I relapsed once, didn't get caught. So then I went out again, and went so hard, that when I returned, there was no hiding it. They knew, and I knew, I had used up every

opportunity that was given to me. I walked out with a small backpack full of clothes and here I was, homeless. And I would be, for the next year.

People ask me all the time what I did to survive, where I slept, how I ate, how I made it through. The first night, was terrifying. Then it became a week, a month, and suddenly, it was normal, and that was even more terrifying. I did things for money that still haunt me. I experienced traumatic situations in which I still can't believe that I'm actually alive. And at times, I wasn't sure which I feared more: death or life. I watched people look at me like I was scum and others who made it a point to not look at me at all. But it was easy to handle, because as long as I remained some level of high, I was dead on the inside. I hadn't felt emotions because I did everything I had to do to get the drugs and avoid those feelings. But my luck ran out, and thank god it did. I found myself in my favorite park, heavily withdrawing and sobbing uncontrollably for the first time in a year. He sat with me. I'll never forget him, because he was the first person in so long to look at me like I was a human being. And he listened to my story, and he was able to help. He gave me a contact at Boston Medical Center. The contact at Boston Medical Center called the Barbara McGinnis Center who told me to hang on for a couple days and I would have a bed in a rehab facility but I had to stay clean for three more days. So I slept on the sidewalk outside, emotional, terrified, ashamed, all the feelings I buried down under years of meth use, finally coming out. And the day came, they put me in a cab, and that was the last time I slept on the streets.

I was lucky enough to have made a good impression at the rehab facility I went to and the halfway house I had been a member of previously. They told me how happy they were to hear from me, they remembered me. That was the first time I ever felt special. They said, "we knew you'd come back someday and honestly there is no better time than right now, we have the perfect counselor for you." They had an intern, who needed to take on one patient to complete his program. The intern, a 10 year clean recovering meth addict. The first counselor I had ever had that experienced meth addiction and the lifestyle of meth and the gay community. I had no idea how much that man would change my life. We worked together for a year. I met him a broken human being and in due time, he slowly and cautiously put all the pieces back together, one by one. I wasn't fixed, but I finally had the tools to know how to take control of my life and find things that would bring me joy.

Enter: Back on My Feet. I was introduced to this program through the halfway house. I was told it was a running club. I had previously gotten into running through some periods of sobriety I had experienced. I found I had a lot of endurance for it. So I signed up, not knowing much about what they had to offer. We went out for 2-3 mile runs, 5:30 am, three days a week. After enough time had passed and I had put in a number of miles with them, they offered me a chance to go back to school. This time for something I really wanted. So I started a program in Exercise Science. I found a passion for fitness in my lifestyle. I realized that I was so capable of more than I had ever believed. And the more challenges I presented myself, the more I believed in myself. Soon enough, I had earned my degree, and I worked as a personal trainer for years and still continue some side work in that field today.

I left the halfway house with a new disposition, a new adventure, and a future that was worth believing in. A year and a half later, I contacted Back on My Feet and said I want to run the Boston Marathon. I had never run a marathon before, I had never experienced a level of fundraising that the marathon expects. I only had a story and a heart so big and hopeful that I would get to run and represent the charity that gave me a future that would change my life. They only had 15 bibs, and they

gave me the last one. In 2018, I experienced a whole new and beautiful journey with them that elevated me from the person I was becoming to the person that I am.

In the next five years, I would experience a level of ups and downs, and wonder what my next adventure would be. I tried a number of things, going back to school for nursing, running different races, helping a friend open up her gym, traveling. I was always looking for some way to sort of fulfill the ambition inside me. After 5 years of running my first marathon for Back on My Feet, I decided it was time to take the journey again. I told them my story, I told them how far I've come in the years since I was just another runner for them at the halfway house. I've found a home, a job that I love, friends that I couldn't replace, and a personal inner love for who I am and how far I've grown. I was their first interview of hundreds that needed to be interviewed. Again, 15 bibs, and they offered me a bib, right on the spot.

Take a look back at the beginning and see all the adjectives I've used to describe myself today. That is the journey I've taken. That is who I am. And that is what I represent. I know that it's been particularly important for this restaurant to represent Worcester charities. I am a Worcester charity. Because today, Worcester is my home. It's where I finally got the life I dreamed of when I dreamed of something better for myself. It's where I finally became the man I was supposed to become. And a significant part of that journey, was my experience with this charity. They supported me when I was ready to accept the support. They believed in me once to be successful for them, and they believe in me again. There are many other factors involved in my journey from homeless to marathons. But this is the one I get to pay back. And my story isn't pretty, it isn't glamorous. But it is an amazing story to tell. I have \$10,000 to raise for this charity. This restaurant can help me get there. So take the chance and I promise the man I first described, is the man that will represent this bar in the best of ways.