

## RM 9–SU: Sam’s Story: Walnut Creek Teen’s Road from Meth\*

*San Francisco Chronicle*  
Christopher Heredia, *Chronicle* Staff Writer  
Tuesday, May 6, 2003

When Sam first tried crystal meth with her Walnut Creek high school friends last year, she was scared. But she liked it. She did it again. And again.

Sam had always hated her body, and now she was losing weight. She finally belonged. She’d been depressed, and the meth was holding that at bay.

Yet not much later, she started fighting with her parents and her friends. Sometimes she spent days on end in her room, fearful that the police were about to knock at her door. She was sure they were coming to get her. She couldn’t sleep. She weighed only 100 pounds – down from 145. She saw a skeleton in the mirror. Her hair was falling out. She felt alone.

She was anything but.

Just as meth has become an epidemic in gay communities across the nation, so it has infected the country’s suburban teens in alarming proportions. National health studies show that use of methamphetamine is growing faster among American teenagers than any other drug. Only marijuana is used more than meth.

National health experts say meth gets an ironclad grip on suburban teens like Sam because they are bored, troubled, ready to travel. They’re loaded with emotional baggage, looking for a way out. Often they’re depressed, stressed beyond their limits. Maybe an attention deficit disorder or learning disability was never discovered.

“Meth will . . . kill you,” Sam says. “It f- up my life.”

Sam’s life so far is 17 years long. She lives at home in Walnut Creek with her parents and younger sister. The family is comfortably middle class. The house is four-bedroom, three-bath. Their drive is private. They own a truck and an SUV, two boats, a large-screen TV.

But from January to September of 2002, their life was a living hell. Sam was disturbed and using meth. Her father drank heavily. Her mother was already exhausted from muscular dystrophy.

During the nine months of turmoil, Sam never had any problems getting meth. It was cheap – the going rate for one night’s worth for two was \$40 – if she had to pay at all. Sam says friends at Northgate High School often just gave it to her.

“It’s everywhere,” she says. “You can’t escape from it.”

*Continued*

---

\* Source: SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE by Christopher Heredia. Copyright 2003 by *San Francisco Chronicle*.  
Reproduced with permission of *San Francisco Chronicle* in the format Other book via Copyright Clearance Center.  
Reproduced with permission of *San Francisco Chronicle* in the format CD ROM via Copyright Clearance Center.

**Note:** Review this RM before using it with students to check for suitability and appropriateness.

**RM 9–SU: Sam’s Story:  
Walnut Creek Teen’s Road from Meth (*Continued*)**

But escape it she did. And she and her family hope now that by sharing their experience—everything but their last name—they will help others escape, too.

This is Sam’s story.

*The First Time*

Growing up, Sam never cared for Britney Spears. Or dieting. Or athletics. Instead, she drew and wrote poetry. She downloaded music from the Internet. Her favourite band was Sublime, whose lead guitarist, Bradley Nowell, an idol of Sam’s, died of a heroin overdose in 1996.

Sam wore jeans and a sweatshirt most of the time. She lined her eyelids with a dark pencil, but left the rest of her makeup subtle.

Sam was not part of any clique at school. Her younger sister, Jessica, was always the goal-oriented one. Jessica, 15, got straight A’s in school and was a varsity cheerleader with a brilliant smile.

Sam’s family lived a typical suburban life. Her mother, Stephanie, did volunteer work, and her father, Mike, was a telecommunications manager. Sam liked to just hang at Sunvalley Mall in Concord and strum her guitar with her friends in the park.

In the summer of 2001, Sam tried alcohol. She was 16. Her drink of choice was beer—MGD was her favourite brand. She also smoked weed. Then in January 2002, she did some cocaine.

She knew nothing about meth. A couple of weeks after doing the coke, a friend offered her some meth.

Because she was at her friend’s house, and her girlfriend was doing it, it seemed OK. Sam swallowed her fears. All told, there were four girls. They each snorted some.

And then they snorted more.

Sam and her friends liked to call meth “tweak.”

Soon enough, Sam was snorting or smoking tweak every day. It made her happy.

It made her talkative. It made her energetic. And she lost lots of weight.

These were the good times. They didn’t last.

*Continued*

**RM 9–SU: Sam’s Story:  
Walnut Creek Teen’s Road from Meth (*Continued*)**

*Signs of Trouble*

A schoolmate of Sam’s called Stephanie in late February. She [Sam] hadn’t been showing up for class. She was constantly stoned, the friend said. Her parents were infuriated. They sat Sam down and confronted her. She lied to them. She told them she’d been getting high on weed – marijuana, that was all.

When she owned up to her parents days later, told them she was doing speed, they were shocked. Then worried.

“It’s the worst s- you can do,” they told her.

They grounded her for a week. Sam thought the punishment was unfair, but she knew she could wait them out.

She started sneaking off through her first-floor bedroom window and making up stories about whom she was seeing. All the while, she was smoking pot, but not meth. Her friends didn’t have tweak. She did this from January until the end of August. Then one Wednesday night, she did some cocaine a friend had. The next day, her friend got some tweak. She was back on it again.

She hung with school friends who sold drugs on the side. Two male friends would give her the drug for free, or at least dirt cheap.

She isolated herself from friends who didn’t do drugs so they wouldn’t find out about her habit. She was ashamed. She was “cracked out” – irritated, agitated, paranoid. She thought people were watching her every move. She started to hallucinate.

One time, she went to the mall with her sister. She used her dad’s credit card to take \$20 from a cash machine, to buy drugs. Her dad found out. Jessica told on her big sister. Her dad exploded, gave Sam a verbal lashing.

That night, Sam ran away. She was leaving for good. She went to a friend’s house in Walnut Creek.

She smoked pipe after pipe of speed, until 7 a.m. the next day. Her parents, meanwhile, frantically searched all night. They finally found her by calling friend after friend. They brought her home.

*Continued*

## **RM 9–SU: Sam’s Story: Walnut Creek Teen’s Road from Meth (*Continued*)**

On her mom’s birthday in August, she was so high she didn’t want to join the family celebration at a restaurant in Lafayette. She was exhausted and fell asleep in the car. Her family forced her to go inside. All Sam could think about was how much she hated being there.

She wondered whether her parents would notice how large her pupils were. She didn’t eat a thing.

For four weeks, throughout August, Sam smoked meth every day. After she ran away, her dad sat her down and asked her if she wanted help. She said yes.

In early September, she began a drug rehabilitation program at New Bridge Foundation, a private outpatient clinic in Walnut Creek. Her parents’ insurance covered most of the cost.

Sam had to make a pact with herself and her family. She signed a home contract that said, in part, “Today is my last day using speed.” The contract required her to list the friends she vowed not to see, to submit to two urine tests a week to check for drugs.

Sam was on the road to recovery.

### ***A Shocking Revelation***

Weeks after signing the home contract, Sam attended a family treatment meeting with her parents at New Bridge Foundation. Teens around the room were sharing their stories.

Sam had been telling her parents that she hadn’t used meth since beginning treatment – and they’d believed her. But at this meeting, Sam piped right up. She looked at Stephanie and Mike and said: “Mom and Dad, I used.”

Stephanie’s heart went to her stomach. She began to sob. “I thought you were through with it, Sam.” Stephanie couldn’t stop crying.

Sam would relapse two more times.

### ***Setting Goals***

By November 2002, Sam had been clean for 45 days – the relapses were a thing of the past.

Sam agreed with everyone that she needed some goals to help her stay drug free. She filled out a form from the New Bridge Foundation that included warning signs to watch out for: “lack of meetings, isolation, anger/sadness (sic), hanging out with using friends, going to partys (sic).”

*Continued*

## **RM 9–SU: Sam’s Story: Walnut Creek Teen’s Road from Meth (*Continued*)**

She also listed issues to work on: “dealing with my anger, keeping busy, working out my feelings, staying clean.”

At about the same time, Sam began seeing a therapist, Dr. Alex Stalcup of Lafayette, who diagnosed Sam as being depressed and started treating her for attention deficit disorder.

Despite Sam’s progress, Stalcup was concerned. His patient’s recovery was very fragile.

### ***Day 64 of Being Clean***

On a December day in Walnut Creek Sam’s mother is still adjusting to the ordeal of her daughter’s meth addiction.

“I’m the pushover mommy,” Stephanie says, sitting at the family’s kitchen table. She has changed her parenting techniques. “It took awhile to sink in that things aren’t right and I have to be stern. I also don’t want to get in her face. I’m trying to let her work through things. We’re taking it from day to day.”

Stephanie and Mike took away Sam’s driving privileges indefinitely. They forced her to come home immediately after school or any meeting of Narcotics Anonymous. Her mom drove her to the meetings.

Stephanie and Mike had other issues to deal with. Sam couldn’t stand the thought of being in the house because she resented the temptation of Mike’s wine and beer in the refrigerator. After a family discussion about Mike’s drinking, all alcohol was removed from the house.

Stephanie and Mike went to a meeting of Al-Anon, a program for friends and families of alcoholics and addicts. At the meeting, they learned that addiction is a disease. It’s not somebody’s choice. It’s not under their control.

That helped.

### ***Ups and Downs***

On Day 94 of being clean—early January—Sam was moody. She slept until midafternoon. The doctor had her on a new antidepressant.

Stephanie had gone into Sam’s room days earlier and was certain she’d smelled the stench of alcohol.

*Continued*

**RM 9–SU: Sam’s Story:  
Walnut Creek Teen’s Road from Meth (*Continued*)**

“She’s just not a happy person,” Stephanie says. “I think it goes back to her ADD and depression. I’m very worried. It’s just scary. As a mom, you want to fix things, and I can’t fix this.”

“She doesn’t want to be around the family. She wants to avoid responsibility issues. Her schoolwork is still sitting there.”

Sam’s father also believes that the family and its problems contributed to Sam’s escape to drugs. But he says adolescent experimentation and Sam’s isolation took their toll.

“Kids, as they grow up – we as parents have our ideas – you try to teach them,” Mike says. “Sometimes yelling and screaming happens in every family. That probably contributed as well. When they don’t do well at school, you put pressure on them, and they try to escape from pressures.”

“Speed is rampant out here, as I’m sure it is everywhere. We’re proud of her for being able to beat it, stay off it. Not a lot of people can do that.”

Stephanie is afraid every time Sam leaves the house that Sam may not come home – ever. “Hopefully she’ll stay in aftercare. We’re going to use all the resources we have.”

Stephanie might worry less if she could hear her own daughter’s stories.

Like the story where Sam handles a New Year’s phone call from one of her old using friends.

“She told me she hadn’t slept for a couple of days,” Sam says. “She’s dating a drug dealer. Those people don’t appeal to me. She was saying, ‘Let’s hang out. I haven’t seen you.’ I didn’t want to talk to her anymore.”

“This is the best I’ve ever been. No more lies, no more hiding, no more chaos. Instead of dealing with problems in bad ways, we work it out. I thought meth was fun. In reality, it was not fun.”

Sam came to realize that boredom played a role in her getting hooked on meth: “Everyone has lots of money. Parents give kids money. There’s nothing to do in Walnut Creek. Meth puts excitement into your world. It was my favourite drug to do. It’s also the worst. It’s so dirty.”

*Continued*

## **RM 9–SU: Sam’s Story: Walnut Creek Teen’s Road from Meth (*Continued*)**

### *A Big Day*

“Way to go, Sam!” says teacher Amy Bush, handing Sam a letter. “Done!” Sam says. “I’m going to hang it on my wall. Yahoo!”

Sam has just completed her course requirements at Nueva Vista Continuation High School.

“At times, it was like pulling teeth out with pliers,” chimes in Nueva Vista Principal Julie Hernandez.

Sam’s final project, handed in on Jan. 31, was several poems and a paper about her battle with meth addiction.

Sam turns 18 on June 4. She will receive her diploma June 8, then plans to continue her studies at Diablo Valley College in the fall and look for a job. Her dad has promised her a Jeep and a cell phone.

“I have goals and plans and deadlines and clean days to keep track of,” she says. “I can’t use. I could die. Things will be the same if I use again. It used to solve problems when I was high. Now I deal with problems.”

### *The Future*

As of today, Sam has been clean for 220 days.

It hasn’t been easy.

“I’ll still be here to do anything I can to help her,” Stephanie says. “You can’t give up on these kids. You love them and want them to get through it. They can’t do it without a strong family.”

For her part, Sam has never been happier – or felt stronger.

“I don’t want to go back,” she says. “Things are really good now. I’ve got my house, my dad is buying me a Jeep, I got my cell and my parents’ trust.

“Adulthood means I’ve got to be responsible now, do stuff for me my parents can’t.”