

# Father and son grow fans with book about meth

by Jacoba Charles

Nic Sheff, who grew up in Inverness Park, was an honors student who graduated from Marin Academy in 2000. That summer, ill and strung out, Nic called his father, asking to be picked up in an alley. He had been missing for five days. The event forced his family to confront the fact that he was addicted to crystal meth. During the next five years he picked up addictions to heroin and alcohol, stole, lived on the street, went in and out of five rehab centers – and survived. Now 25, Nic has been sober for two years.

Nic and his father, David Sheff, have each explored the harrowing experience of Nic's addiction in a pair of books that were published in February. The two memoirs have been received enthusiastically; "Beautiful boy: a father's journey through his son's addiction" by David is number one on the New York Times best-seller list, a selection of the Starbuck's book program, and a Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Writers selection.

"Tweak" by Nic is geared toward a teenage and young adult audience and has spent four weeks on the New York Times bestseller list for children's and chapter books, where it debuted in third place.

Tomorrow, Nic and David are wrapping up their joint book tour with a talk at the West Marin School in Point Reyes Station. They have been on the road for over a month, giving readings in a dozen cities across the country.

It turns out that the nation is hungry for a raw, personal exploration of how drug addiction can shatter a life and a family. "Beautiful boy" was born out of a 2005 article in the New York Times Magazine, and the response from readers was striking and immediate.

"I got letters from people all over the country, and they were in exactly the same situation," David said. "The way it feels to have an addict in the family is a whole unique, traumatic thing."

Both father and son say that though the tour has been exhausting, it has also

been a powerfully moving experience to feel that their stories have touched so many lives.

Nic said that he didn't expect the book to be received like it has been. He was excited about the opportunity to put his story on the page, but cynical about the idea that the book could be helpful to other people. He has now learned otherwise.

"I feel like whenever anyone can be really honest and open and stuff it gives other people permission to do that too," Nic said. "Being open, looking at yourself and not being afraid to show the world who you are is a really powerful message."

Nic has always felt compelled to write about his life and his world. In high school he wrote for the newspaper. He also won an essay contest for Newsweek when he wrote about his experience as a joint custody kid, shuttled between Los Angeles and West Marin.

He was a smart, sensitive, likeable boy and when his father caught him smoking pot at age 12, he wasn't worried. "On the one hand we took it seriously but on the other hand Nic was a great student and an athlete," David said. Nic would surf regularly in Bolinas, and at Drakes and North Beaches. He loved his family. There was this sense of nature and health and that his life would probably be okay, David said. But it wasn't, and the drug use escalated.

"It was five years of hell," David said. "He was in and out of rehab, in and out of relapse. There were emergency rooms and arrest. He almost lost his arm from infection from shooting up drugs. He almost didn't make it."

Nic said that he was born to be an addict. The way he responded to his first stolen drink of alcohol at age 11 was very different from that of the friend he was with. The friend thought it was gross; Nic couldn't stop drinking.

"Almost instantly I felt this sort of hunger open up inside of me," Nic said. "I feel I had like the perfect blend of environment and genetics to make me a drug addict and alcoholic. My parents



David Sheff raised two sons and a daughter in Inverness. His book "Beautiful boy: a father's journey through his son's addiction" is a current best seller.

getting divorced or the girl in fifth grade who told me I was ugly – all of those little things affected me but its not like any of them made me a drug addict. There was a very real component of genetics."

So far, the Sheffs have been lucky. Though he relapsed for three months in the middle of writing "Tweak", Nic has stayed sober for two years. He is hesitant to say he's changed – the hunger is always there, and a glass of wine at dinner would broker a drinking binge – but he hopes that he knows his limits better now.

The book tour has also exposed both father and son to many people whose

children were not so fortunate. People have driven for half a day to hear them talk, as if making a pilgrimage to their own sorrow.

"In Washington DC, Nic and I walked in together and we could feel this sense of desperation in the first person who walked up to us," David said. "His daughter had died about four months earlier and he said he'd driven four and a half hours to see us. He just wept and we were in tears as well. To say it's overwhelming is an understatement. And there are so many stories like that."

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