



UNWRECKED

BY MARK BERRY >> PHOTOS BY KIP BULWINKLE '04

This past year, the College formally established the Collegiate Recovery Program with the hiring of Director Wood Marchant '89. Powered by philanthropy and student action, this program supports students in recovery from addictive behaviors and is the first of its kind in South Carolina.





It's way too easy to focus on the negative. The broken pieces. The sharp shards of destructive behavior strewn figuratively and literally across our country. For too many of us, addiction and its inevitable fallout is like observing a car wreck on the side of the highway. You can't help but strain your neck, with macabre fascination, hoping/not hoping to catch a glimpse of something terrible. And then you pass by, relieved it's not you and letting the horrific memory fade like yesterday's grocery list, reassured by the thought that that was someone else's problem, someone else's misfortune.

But that line of thinking goes beyond naïve. In fact, the car wreck is not on the side of the road, but tumbling along the highway, crisscrossing lanes and wreaking havoc and chaos with everything - and everyone - it touches. Whether you like it or not, addiction is a national problem, one that affects rich, poor, old, young - an equal opportunity menace.

And, in many ways, it always has been. Since the first grape was fermented into wine and early grains brewed into beer, humanity has enjoyed substances that deliver consumers into different states of consciousness. And some have found that they preferred that "elevated" state above all else. Literature, across the ages, is populated with characters and stories linked to some form of addiction. They are, at times, funny, tragic, relatable, despicable: Greek mythology's Dionysus, Shakespeare's Falstaff, *The Simpsons'* Barney, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, *Breaking Bad's* Jesse Pinkman, to name but a very few.

Ernest Hemingway famously quipped that "A man does not exist until he is drunk." As any person in recovery will tell you, that type of bravado is the addict's false shield in the battle of dependence. And, unfortunately, society all too often hides behind that same logic.

But things have changed quite drastically in recent years. Technology is not only a disruptor in the business world; it has also played an outsized role in the creation of new drugs, such as opioids, a class of drugs that are powerful pain relievers (think codeine, fentanyl and oxycodone).

So what, you might ask. This is happening to other people. Bad families, absentee parents, wayward children. Except, it's not.

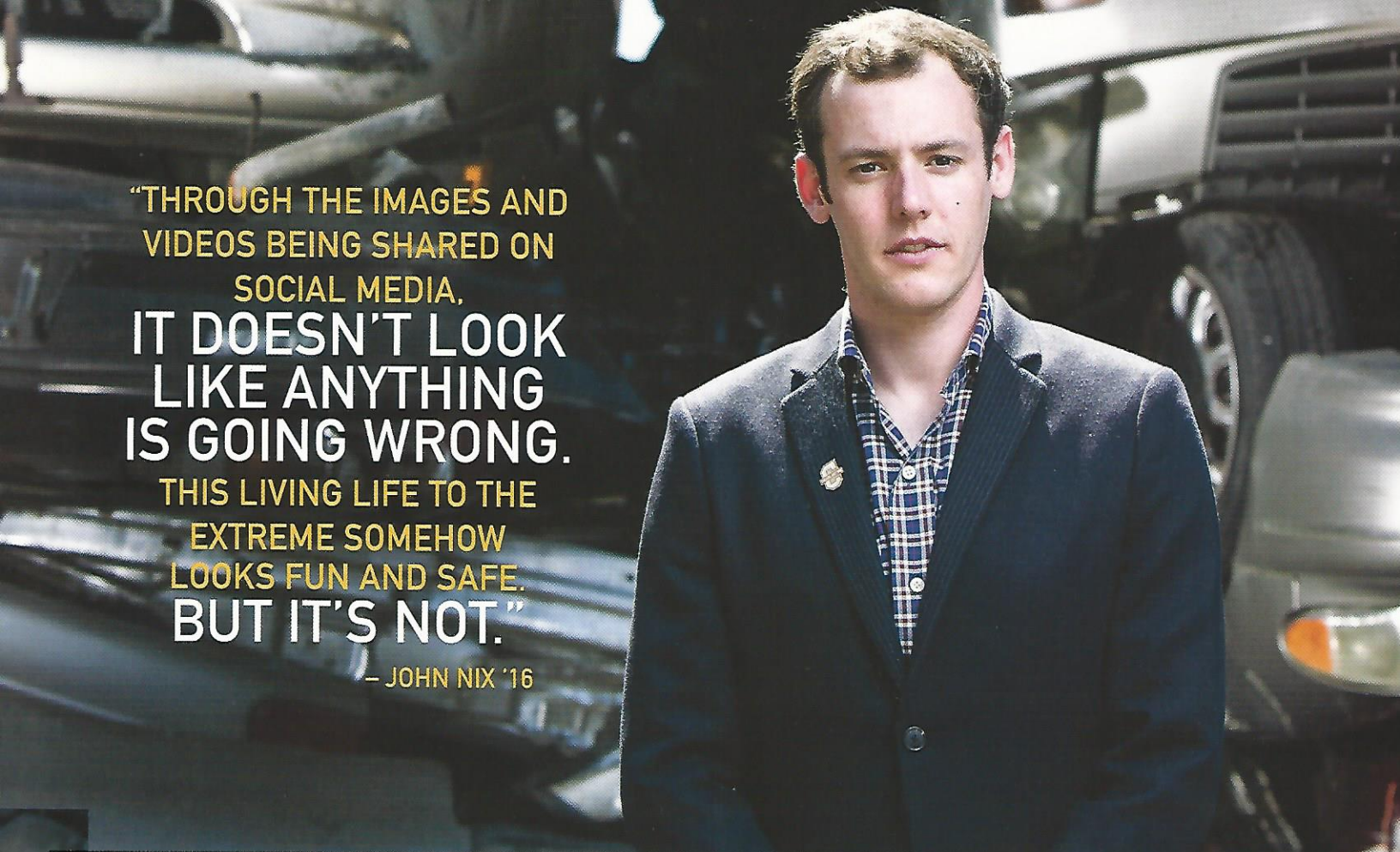
Talk to any teenager today and you will reconsider the "bad family" proposition. The rebelliousness of youth - a standard myth we all share in American society - may explain away the need for experimentation. However, this rite of passage is being undertaken today in a much more dangerous setting than the seemingly carefree days of pot and beer buzzes. Compared to the mix of marijuana and cocktails of 50 years ago, the combination of today's more powerful drugs with alcohol is like comparing the weaponry of the American Revolution with World War II. Today's synthetic drugs are almost nuclear in their capacity to hook users. In this new world, a little becomes a lot in hyper drive.

As you might guess, the statistics are disheartening. According to the Centers for Disease Control, in 2015, the number of overdose deaths (52,404) eclipsed the number of people who died in car



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crashes (37,757) or were killed by guns (36,252). The CDC has also stated that opiate addiction costs the American economy \$78.5 billion per year. This rise in usage is particularly relevant for higher education, as the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration reports that college students are the fastest-growing segment seeking substance abuse treatment, with a 1,143 percent increase in the past decade. Journalist Christopher Caldwell, in his article “American Carnage: The New Landscape of Opioid Addiction,” asserts that the current opioid crisis is claiming five times the number of lives than the crack epidemic of the 1980s, which launched the country’s first War on Drugs.

A war that was never won.

DWELLING ON THE POSITIVE

Wood Marchant '89 is an optimist and a realist. An odd combination, to say the least. His voice is soft, reassuring, earnest. His reddish beard streaked with white is a fitting representation of his youthful outlook intertwined with his hard-knocks wisdom.

Marchant is not shy with his own story, his own struggles with addiction; nor is he some brash evangelist telling everyone how to live his or her life. To be clear, he is not proud of his years-long dependence on alcohol and marijuana, but neither is he embarrassed by it. He understands that addiction is not a sign of weakness or inability. Addiction is not who he is as a person, just as melanoma is not the defining trait of a cancer survivor.

“From about 20 to 31, I was a daily pot smoker,” says Marchant, who graduated with a degree in English from the College. “I found that marijuana calmed me down and allowed me to focus - or so I thought. Actually, working or studying is the last thing you want to do after you get stoned. Marijuana was a great de-motivator in

my life, and that certainly had an impact on my attempts at being a journalist and later as an advertising copywriter.”

Marchant, who worked for several years on the sports desk for *The Post and Courier*, moved to Atlanta for graduate school in order to pursue a career in advertising.

“I blamed Charleston for my problems. On some unspoken level, I moved to Atlanta to get sober,” Marchant explains. “However, I learned quickly that the habits I had formed in Charleston went with me. Charleston, in my mind, was a party city, a party culture - well, all that existed in Atlanta, too. So, those habits traveled with me.”

But that wasn't the kind of baggage that would outfit him for success: “My notion of graduate school was wrapped up in a romance of the ad world catering to hard living - a vision of *Mad Men* before there was a *Mad Men* television show. But I learned that I couldn't do the creative work to be successful. I didn't have the follow-through. Eventually, I hit the point where I was so depressed that I couldn't even look at myself in the mirror.”

All that changed on August 10, 1997, when Marchant chose sobriety, and two years later, he returned to Charleston: “I wanted to be stable in my recovery before I came back here, making sure that I had built the proper foundation of support. To be honest, I was nervous about coming back, but I knew my life was better. I was thinking clearly and I was a whole lot less depressed. I missed Charleston and I knew I had to come back, in part to come to terms with my past. I had some ghost busting to do in this haunted house, if you will - making amends and making things right.”

Back in Charleston, he completed his master's in social work while commuting to Columbia and teaching fifth and seventh graders and running an afterschool program at a downtown school. After that, he focused on his counseling career: doing



social work in a psychiatric ward; providing support in an HIV/AIDS clinic at the Medical University of South Carolina; going into private practice as a therapist for several years; working as a counselor at the Charleston Center, a 28-day traditional inpatient rehabilitation center; and, most recently, serving as a faculty member at MUSC's Center for Drug and Alcohol Programs, its outpatient drug treatment center.

"When this position at the College became available," Marchant says, "I knew that this was the perfect job for me. I know how to be sober. I know how those of us in recovery need a community, need support and need to stay together. And I knew that this was how I could best serve my alma mater."

In November 2016, Marchant became the first director of the first collegiate recovery program in South Carolina.

"But let me be clear," Marchant says, "I am only here because of the amazing work that John and Isaac, among many, *many* others, did. They started something really special."

ROAD TO RECOVERY

Students John Nix and Isaac Waters knew that the College of Charleston needed a recovery program on campus. Veterans of Charleston's extensive recovery community, they saw an opportunity for the College to be a leader in an area that is growing in need and relevance.

They had both seen firsthand the devastating effects of addiction. They knew how quickly things could spiral out of control for young people, and they wanted to make a difference.

"Addiction is rampant," Nix says. "Drugs and alcohol affect every socio-economic group. In a way, it's normalized on college campuses. Through the images and videos being shared on social media, it doesn't look like anything is going wrong. This living life to the extreme somehow looks fun and safe. But it's not."

Waters agrees: "You probably don't want to hear this, but in some ways, the Baby Boomers and Gen Xers set up this mentality of work hard, play hard. Call it the weekend binge drinkers at the neighborhood barbeque. However, as the millennials try to emulate their parents, the play is much harder today because the substances at hand are much stronger. Now, that Friday-to-Sunday fun seeps into Monday and maybe longer. Or maybe, it doesn't even stop. Today's substances can intoxicate you for 24 hours at a time, and it's impossible to get away from. As I learned even in middle school, drugs don't stop at a school's front gates."

However, hope is not all lost. Both Nix and Waters believed that there was a space for students in recovery at the College, and so they got to work. Through their network in the Charleston recovery community, they met Steve Pulley, an MUSC graduate student, at the time, who told them about a similar program in Georgia. With the help of teacher education professor Genny Howe Hay '82, they were able to talk to Dean of Students Jeri Cabot about bringing this concept to campus.

Starting in the fall of 2015, Nix, Waters and Dean Cabot began meeting weekly to flesh out the idea. Every Monday, the three would get together and figure out short-term action items and the different community members to involve.

One of the critical pieces to fall into place was the support of Judge Brucie Howe Hendricks '83, Genny Hay's sister and a Greenville, S.C.-based federal judge who started the state's BRIDGE Program, a drug court established to help drug



offenders overcome their addictions and stay out of jail. Judge Hendricks (the 2015 recipient of the College's Distinguished Alumna Award) understood how important a program like this could be and was an early champion.

But a program like this also needed a champion on the inside - someone inside Randolph Hall to truly make a difference. When College President Glenn McConnell '69 learned of the idea, he quickly recognized the possibilities - how it meshed with the College's public mission, how it could be a program of distinction and how it, if fully implemented, could better serve the College's student population as a whole. As a priority of the president's office, the dominoes started falling quickly - with Nix and Waters meeting with campus leadership in student affairs, specifically Executive Vice President Alicia Caudill (on her second day of the job, no less), and later the College's Board of Trustees.

But an idea is only as good as the resources supporting it. Nix, Waters and Dean Cabot secured a \$10,000 grant from Transforming Youth in Recovery and a \$25,000 grant from the S.C. Department of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse Services to get the ball rolling, but they needed more help. Working in concert with the student affairs staff and the College's development office, Nix and Waters connected with Patty Scarafile '66, former CEO of Carolina One Real Estate, who made a significant lead gift and then hosted a networking event at her home to inspire others to give. Soon, more than \$250,000 was raised to launch the program and hire its first director.

Nix, who graduated in spring 2016 with a degree in finance, is still amazed at how everything came together: "The Collegiate Recovery Program represents a lot of hard work by a lot of people. It is one of my proudest achievements, seeing everyone working together, all the wheels spinning at the right time."

PILLARS OF SUPPORT

"Let me tell you what we are not," Marchant says. "We are not a treatment program. Our students have already gotten sober and are living lives in recovery. We are an abstinence-based program. Think of it as a sober fraternity-sorority with a focus on community service, mutual support and leadership."

But the program also serves as a resource to the campus at large. This spring, Marchant began hosting an open forum for the rest of campus who might be interested in sober living. In these meetings, students who may be having difficulty with drugs and alcohol or other addictive behaviors can hear stories from those in recovery as well as find out about ways to seek help.

"Collegiate recovery programs are trying to show other students that it is OK to hit bottom at this age," Marchant explains, "and we have a better way. As I tell them, it is never a bad idea to get sober. Your grades will get better, your health will get better."

"I can't tell you how encouraging it is to see our recovery students," Marchant continues, "who have been sober for a few years working with some of the newer students who are just now getting sober or in the process of making that decision to become substance free. The peer-to-peer support is key. They can tell students what sobriety is and, more importantly, what sobriety isn't. While I may still think of myself as a 20-year-old college student walking around this campus, I know in reality I am a 50-year-old guy - not as relatable as I think I am. When I see our students bridging that gap, and being able to say, 'I remember this

is what I did in early recovery' - it's neat to observe these authentic connections and to see how this is going to grow and thrive."

One of those students serving as a model for sober living is Brittany Vannort, a 29-year-old psychology major. However, as Vannort will tell you, looks can be deceiving.

"This is what a junkie looks like now," Vannort says, pointing to herself. "It's not someone holding a paper bag and living under a bridge. It's someone 29 years old, 22 years old, 19 years old. It's your next-door neighbor, it's your best friend, it's your sister, it's your cousin."

Vannort's own 12-year struggle with addiction reads like a made-for-television cautionary tale. An honor roll student and cheerleader starts experimenting with marijuana at age 13, then becomes a daily drug user in high school; by college, she is using harder drugs and fails out, falling deeper into addiction. Car crashes, relapses, jail sentences and near-death overdoses served as the milestones that marked her early 20s.

"Addiction doesn't pick and choose the way parents may want to believe," Vannort observes. "But somehow, I survived and found help and a new life through recovery. I am here to serve as an example that it's OK to hit rock bottom. Actually, most times, it's not the end of the world. Yes, it's scary, but if you face it head on, it gets better and the more likely you'll have a chance to succeed."

And through the College's Collegiate Recovery Program, students can find that safe haven and network of support, both on peer-to-peer and administrative levels.

"What I love most about the College," Vannort says, "are its unique campus and unique programs. And I can tell you that you don't have to choose between the school you want and being in recovery. You can come here and be confident that you will be safe and healthy and supported and have fun while you're doing it. We have a very unique thing going on here."

And that is exactly what Waters, a business administration major, envisioned in those early planning sessions just two years ago: making the College more accessible to students serious about learning and growing.

"What most people don't realize is that people in recovery get to live two lives," Waters says, "with that second one being an amazing, miraculous life."

Marchant smiles that knowing smile in thinking about the miraculous lives he's observed in the recovery community and the potential for this program, with thoughts of scholarships and sober living facilities on campus in the not-too-distant future.

But, more importantly, Marchant believes in how this program can be more than a lifeline, but an incredible launch pad: "About every family today knows someone who has a substance abuse problem, and we, at the College, now have a program for the student who is in recovery and who wants a safe environment. We know why we love this school and love this town. Now, we can better share that with students who want the same thing. We have a safe place for them to come to school and turn them into leaders and prepare them for what comes next - as is the charge of this great school." 📍



Learn more about the College of Charleston Collegiate Recovery Program and ways to provide support at deanofstudents.cofc.edu/collegiate-recovery-program/.