

Episode 010: You Don't Have To Live Like This - Denny Kolsch

Please note: This transcript has been lightly edited to remove filler words or sounds.

Lindsay Kolsch [over music]: You're listening to the To Write Love on Her Arms podcast, a show about mental health and the things that make us human. We'll be sharing stories and conversations about topics we tend not to talk about, like depression, addiction, self-injury, and suicide.

Lindsay: Each week you'll be hearing stories from some amazing people. We'll talk about how mental health has shaped their journey, and you'll continue to hear ways how you can carry this conversation into your community. We hope you'll not only connect to the episodes and conversations in a meaningful way, but we hope that maybe this podcast will make it easier for you to have conversations in your own life.

Jamie Tworkowski: Hello, this is Jamie Tworkowski. In this episode, I got to sit down with my long-time friend, Denny Kolsch. We talked about Denny's story, going back to when he was a kid. And early on there were words like sensitive, shy, quiet, and as Denny got older those words turned into anxiety and substance abuse and addiction. And you fast forward to today, and Denny is a husband and a father and he's doing some incredible work with something called Peace Club, serving to some part of the solution to the opioid epidemic in America.

Jamie: Denny talks to us about this epidemic, about this opioid crisis—what is the big picture? Why is this happening? Denny was willing to be open and honest about his struggles and the pain that he's known and also why it continues to be personal to him and to his local community. I'm excited for you to hear this conversation.

[music playing, leading into episode]

Jamie: I am super honored to be sitting here today with my longtime friend, Denny Kolsch. Denny is the Co-founder and Chief Clinical Officer of something called Peace Club, which I am excited for you to hear more about. Denny, thank you for being with us today.

Denny Kolsch: Good to be here.

Jamie: I guess it makes sense to start at the beginning, so would love to hear just a little bit about you and specifically about growing up.

Denny: So I grew up in Cape Canaveral, Florida, and spent the majority of my youth surfing, playing sports. I grew up with the same group of friends that I've known my whole life. We went to the same schools together starting with elementary school. So I grew up in this pretty unique, small community where everyone knew each other. I would say that I had a very happy childhood, and I would say I started to struggle with what I would now call Social Anxiety

Disorder at a pretty young age. So I remember being called words like quiet and shy, and just feeling a little bit like now that I look back, felt a little bit different because I didn't talk.

Denny: And that was kind of like the norm. Like you're in society, you're supposed to talk a lot or talk some. So there was even a moment when my teacher tried to, in kindergarten, tried to hold me back because I didn't talk, and so my dad, she thought I was, she thought I had a learning disability and tried to hold me back. And my dad was like, no, he just probably doesn't want to talk or whatever. Um, but you're not holding him back. I kind of wish he did because I would have excelled more in sports, but it was a cool story right there because he stepped in and, and knew more of what I think was going on. But yet my family didn't really even fully understand it.

Denny: I didn't understand it. And kind of fast forward through high school and I start to, I start to really develop more anxiety. My social anxiety starts to manifest in ways where I avoid going to school if I have a presentation or if I have to do something where I know I'm going to have to publicly talk. I was terrified by those kinds of experiences, so I really began to develop this phobia toward it and so I would avoid a lot of these important moments through high school because of it. And so I started to deal with that anxiety and with just, I think the shame that came with some of my choices, and some of my avoidant behavior by using substances. Drinking, that really set me up around the 11th and 12th grade year to several years afterward of pretty severe addiction and pain, I would say emotional pain.

Denny: I graduated high school and really felt lost. I didn't know which direction I was going to go in, but I had a good sense of what people expected out of me, what my family, I thought, expected out of me, what society expected out of me. So I tried to do the whole stay home, go to the local school, and try to maintain some sense of responsibility. And all the while I'm struggling pretty severely with an anxiety disorder that has manifested now into a Depression Disorder, and I'm using any substances I can get ahold of to silence that, that war inside myself. So all of those things combined, the substance use and the mental health stuff going on, just really immersed into hopelessness, hopelessness and feeling extremely lost and purposeless. I grew up in the church. I don't know that I would say I identified as a Christian early on, but that's what I knew. And then I, I came to a point 18, 19 years old where I would have identified as an atheist. I just felt pretty a purposeless and I felt like I didn't have much meaning in my life. And so all of that together started to manifest in a pretty significant, severe addiction disorder. And so my story unfolded, like the crux of it with substance use unfolded, I would say when, um, I was 19 years old. I was actively using, I was actively selling to support using and to support my life. And I come home one night from a bar with a buddy and we'd been drinking.

Denny: I came home and a friend pulled out a pill out of his pocket. It was an oxycontin. It was the year 2001 when oxycontin started to really become popular and people started to learn how to abuse it. And I had tried it in high school one time, like right when it came out and it was something I just didn't like. It made me feel terrible and like anxious and agitated and like, I just didn't like it, but here it was now a couple of years later, feeling way more lost than I had felt then. You know, the kind of, I guess the stars kind of aligned in that regard where I took this pill,

said whatever, I'll try it. It didn't really matter. And shortly thereafter, I started to find my solution, I would say. So I stumbled into this opioid addiction, um, at the age of 19.

Denny: And at that point is when everything started to just unravel. It was a cycle of me using on the weekends, which turned to a couple of days during the week and on the weekends, which turned to me waking up three months later and feeling physically ill, wondering why I felt ill and asking about a, um, I'm on the phone with a buddy and I'm telling them I'm sick. I thought it might've been the flu or whatever. And he asked me when the last time that I didn't use opiates because he knew I was using and I said I don't know, maybe a couple months. And his response to me was that I was dope sick. So dope sick is when you're physically dependent and withdrawing on opiates typically. So, so in that moment is when my whole conception of myself started to change, because now I was, I was the addict, I was the junkie.

Denny: Um, I remember even in my pursuit of knowledge and in truth and meaning in my life, I was reading a, a book by William S. Burroughs, a popular author in the, in the fifties and sixties, that was like the father of the beatnik generation. It was a book called *Junkie*. And I really heavily identified with that book, to the point where, I mean, it was kind of telling of where I was. And I remember my mom's friends sometimes, like asking me like, 'What are you reading that book for? And uh, what's going on?' And I almost started to where it like a badge, a badge of honor. Like, I'm a junkie. So in this kind of skewed way, I started to find some sense of identity and meaning because now I didn't have to wake up and wonder what I was going to do with my life. I now woke up and knew exactly what I was going to do. I was going to wake up, find a way to get high and um, and then that turned into a physical dependency which lasted a few years and it turned into a heroin addiction, an IV heroin addiction. That nearly took my life a few times.

Jamie: So what shifted, when did things begin to take a turn? Because obviously you're sitting here, you're healthy, you're doing well, we're going to get to the work that you're doing now. But how did you get out of that dark place that you found yourself in?

Denny: Yeah, it's interesting telling this, this part of the story because um, it's very different. Like how I got sober is very different from the way that I'm currently in, in my life and vocation, helping people get sober. When I tell it, I usually say it with a sense of reservation knowing that there might be someone out there who's kind of hearing it and looking for a way to get sober and I almost don't want people to get sober this way. But for me, one day in the state of my cycles of dependency on opioids. My mom reaches out to me and she knew I was struggling. My family knew I was struggling. They had tried interventions and tried to, uh, just to step in and change the direction of my life. Gave me some opportunities in different ways. So one day my mom calls me up, invites me over for dinner. I was in a place at that point where I was open to something. I had a buddy who I was actively using with for a few years who became a missionary and he was about to head to Africa. And I thought it was really cool to see him do that. I was intrigued by the adventure and I was starting to feel something I would say like moving inside of me just wanting something different from my life, wanting to move, wanting my life to look differently than it was looking.

Denny: So my mom invites me over for dinner and asked me if I would like to go down to Nicaragua on a trip with a local missionary, um, ministry. I think she probably assumed that I would say no because she knew I was very oppositional towards Christianity at that point in my life. But there is an opportunity that arose, a woman who was supposed to go couldn't go and she wanted to donate her ticket to somebody. And so she presented it to my mom and, um, my mom asked me and I, I, uh, I said yes. I said, 'yeah, I said, I'll do it.' So I ended up in Nicaragua about seven, eight days later. And getting, there was a miracle in itself. One, because a lot of things had to happen in seven days to get into Central America, one of which I needed a passport.

Denny: I remember going down to Miami, a passport agency and standing in line and the officer there had to pull me out of line because I was nodding off from just being up several days and using and actively high, and he pulled me out of line and I almost got kicked out. I don't remember very well. My mom tells the story better, but I almost got kicked out of the passport agency. And so I ended up getting a passport, someone donated money for me to, to, um, go on the trip with a flight and then and for rest of the cost of the trip. And so I ended up in Nicaragua and as soon as I get there, I mean I had been up for several days straight bingeing on cocaine and heroin and going back and forth.

Denny: I had an overdose on cocaine during that period. And so I almost died before I got there, but I get there and people that were friends with my mother, they were all on board with helping me, but I looked rough, you know, but there was a few specific women who really stepped up and took the risk and just believed that it was going to work out for me. Um, so I ended up in Nicaragua and as soon as I get there, I don't want to be there. All of my, my comforts, all of the things with my addictions and my, my group of people that I was using with, all of those things I was now removed from. And I felt the anxiety from that. And I remember pretty soon after getting there wanting to come home and, um, go back to Cape Canaveral but I didn't. Instead I was thinking, oh, maybe I'll go to some local pharmacies, you know, in Central America and find a way to get high and do it that way. But, um, as all this chaos is going on inside of my mind, some people that I would say were unexpected, people started to come alongside me and just asked me questions about my life. And, and I knew I looked rough. I knew I looked different. I felt like an outcast, I would say I felt like an outcast more than they perceived me as an outcast. But, um, some people came alongside me and just started to show that they cared about me. I was taken back by that. I was surprised by that. And that started to open me up to the experience, to where I could then move forward with the remaining like five or six days that I was there. And during that trip, during the next five or six days, is when things really began to, uh, transform inside of me. I don't know all the details of how it, how it worked. But I know I was very angry at the idea of God. And then something kind of supernatural started to happen in me and in my life that was changing my desires and opening me up to my experiences. And so with the combination of the mystery that was happening in me and some really key people in my life, I came back from Nicaragua motivated to be sober.

Denny: So motivated, I was coming home. My family's super excited because there was evidence of change happening in me through, just looking at me physically because I hadn't been using for seven days and I was like working and doing some things I hadn't done in awhile, but underneath that I was still physiologically dependent on opioids and so I tried to scratch and claw my way through that again, like, you know, not knowing that there were potential treatment options, not knowing that, um, you know, counseling might be able to help. I just figured I'm going to be able to do this. So I started to try to, try to do it myself. And uh, within about a week, I relapsed.

Denny: I relapsed pretty hard. I ended up in a hotel room, a local hotel room with a couple of friends and went on about a three or four day binge. And I felt awful and ashamed and deceitful because now I was supposed to be the guy who was sober and on this path of recovery and his life is changing. But I was lying. And so, so the key point in my, I would say, shift from, from being dependent on opioids to being on the path of recovery was when I was coming home from the hotel. It was like seven in the morning. I'd been up again several days, I'm going back to the place where I was staying at with a friend who was driving me. And as we're, as we are pulling up to the house, near the house, I see a vehicle that I recognized, it was a white jeep Cherokee.

Denny: In it was my new friend that I met in Nicaragua who was also going through an addiction. And, um, and I see this car and I'm terrified because it's a symbol of accountability and love and all these other things that I was afraid of and I'm becoming anxious. The person I was driving saw that in me and asked me directly if, uh, if I wanted, I wanted her to turn around and drive away, like get away from him. And so I had this moment where I had to make the choice really quickly between vulnerability and openness and healing or addiction, the same road that I was on and um, and so I told them to stop the car and let him see us. So she stops the car, he ends up seeing us and pulls up to the car, gets out of the car, and I'm on the passenger side and he just walks up.

Denny: And it was, it was pretty low key in how this all happened. But the symbolism of it is really the, the parts that, that broke through everything. And he walks up to the window and just says something to the effect of 'you don't have to live like this. I love you. You have a lot of people around you that love you and then he just turned around, told me to call him when I'm ready and he gets in the car and goes away. We go back to the place I was staying at. And at this point I'm starting to, I'm starting to cry. I'm starting to feel the weight of all that emotion, feeling the weight of the shame, feeling the weight of the past couple of days, feeling it all come together and yet feeling loved and sought out by this individual.

Denny: And so that choice of his to step in in that moment where he could have been sleeping in on a Saturday morning, was enough to inspire me to get out of the house that I was staying in, where I was relapsing in, and move into my parents' house. So I move into my parents' house and I would say that was the moment where I really began the process of recovery for the first time. And again, it was unconventional. It looked like me, mostly in my bedroom, reading a ton, trying to understand this newfound conception of God and to build on that, on that

relationship. And then I went to some meetings, I hung out with that guy and we would just go to the beach, we'd work out. So it's kind of this quasi-like treatment experience that I would not recommend, but it worked for me. And so, so yeah, it was um, I don't know how and why exactly it all worked that way, but, but that's what worked for me.

Jamie: And you've been sober ever since.

Denny: Been sober, now it's a, it was my 15th year of sobriety, um, this past August.

Jamie: Wow, that's incredible.

[music playing, leading into ad]

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[music playing, leading back to interview]

Jamie: So somewhere along the way, in this journey in the last 15 years, there's another shift not only to think about your recovery and your sobriety, but to think about helping people as a vocation, as a career, as a job. And so I wonder if you could talk about that process and that, that next shift.

Denny: Immediately when I was in early recovery, I started to feel, I needed to fill the desire for meaning and purpose in my life. The way that that came to me was by trying to become a pastor. And so I started going back to school and the road back to school in itself was really challenging because I had messed up my, my academic record. I was on probation from the local community college because of my terrible GPA. And so, I mean, I, it was like a point zero seven or something, I don't even know it was, it was bad, very bad. And so I had to go back to school and redo a bunch of classes. I finally get through it all and um, ended up at Florida State University and um, I studied philosophy and humanities while I was there. All the while wanting to, in the back of my mind, wanting to become a pastor one day.

Denny: And so I'm doing that and I graduate from Florida State University in 2008. And then I got a call from a buddy that we both know, Byron Cutrer, who at the time was one of the directors at To Write Love on Her Arms in the early days. And he asked me if I would like to come on the team and help with some and just kind of help out with a small team, help it grow. And I jumped on board. I had this idea of still becoming a pastor and going to school, like going

to get my master's in theology or something. And I continued to apply for grad schools and in and, uh, start grad schools. Um, but I moved back to my hometown and started working with To Write Love on Her Arms. I started doing stuff that I, I wouldn't say I didn't have a skillset for, but it was all new.

Denny: I was just going to festivals and connecting with people. So I think at the heart of it was my vocation, which was connecting with people, helping people, being able to share my story. In my time with To Write Love on Her Arms really set me up to where I am today because it opened my eyes to the different pathways of healing and helping others in our communities and my community. It didn't have to look like being the pastor guy and I started to kind of be opposed to that method anyhow, realizing that there was a really deep need in our society for mental health treatment. Um, it was on the heels of early school shootings at universities. So I remember the Virginia Tech shooting, which was one of these, it wasn't the first one of course, but it was one of these early ones in our recent history where it was a massacre.

Denny: A lot of people died. And at the center of that was this story about mental health. And that started to open up the dialogue in our society about mental health, about suicide, about untreated mental health. And I started looking into some statistics about the mental health dilemma that our country was in and the lack of resources and the lack of therapists that could help facilitate some healing in our society in that way. And that was the moment where, again, I just, I felt a shift happening. I applied to grad school, switched from a theology program to a mental health counseling program and started my journey to become a counselor.

Jamie: So now you're in school, you're moving away from the idea of becoming a pastor and you are now working toward becoming a licensed mental health counselor. And what happens next?

Denny: I was still working with To Write Love on Her Arms and I was doing some speaking stuff mostly at universities, high schools, etc. And I just moved through my masters program very quickly. I mean to the point where like our department had to have a meeting about how fast I was going through it. I mean, I was literally, I was flying to Kentucky on weekends to finish up some classes because I was adamant about finishing a semester, several, couple of semesters early and um, I was trying to wrap it up and move on, move on to this thing I was feeling called to. And so, um, so I graduate very quickly. Um, it was like a year and a half and it was supposed to be a three year program. So I graduate and then I was fortunate enough to know some other licensed mental health professionals in the community that I was friends with and they both invited me to do my internship, my master's level, my student level internship and then my postmaster's with them.

Denny: So I worked with a buddy in Orlando called Aaron Moore, who is, who's a familiar to a lot of people that follow To Write Love on Her Arms. So I worked with him in private practice at his place called Solace Counseling. And then I worked also in my hometown in Melbourne, Florida, with a friend called Mike Ronsisvalle at Florida Counseling Centers. So I did my

internships and continue with private practice and I really, I didn't want to be reduced to the therapist who was just working with people in addiction treatment. Um, I didn't want my story of recovery and sobriety to be kind used in that way. Um, I wanted to be, I want it to be really competent in mental health, specifically treatment, not that I would say you can really separate the two, but yeah, I wanted to work on the other side of the, what we call co-occurring disorders. So, um, so I did a lot of my training with families with children with autism, ADHD, and I avoided as much as possible consciously and subconsciously working with people with addiction disorders.

Jamie: So at this point you're trying to avoid being pigeonholed as a substance abuse counselor. Did another shift begin for you?

Denny: Yeah, so... I don't know, like when you kind of, when we all back up from our life, from all the nuances of it, the day to day grind of it, um, and we open ourselves up to these larger stories, these bigger narratives, these important points in our life. I think we can all...And we most likely see these in retrospect, but I think we can all see these significant moments, um, that come from a combination of events in our society, events in family members lives mixed in with events in our own lives. And so, so this shift occurred through, me seeing one morning the news about Philip Seymour Hoffman dying from a heroin overdose in 2014. And he was one of my favorite actors. It was around that time that this whole, you know, story about the heroin crisis started to emerge and I knew full well about the opioid issue that was going on in our country for at that point, like 10 years or something, 10, 15 years starting with oxycontin.

Denny: And then that turned into a bunch of pain clinics mostly in South Florida where people were coming from all over the country to take advantage of. So I knew there was an issue going on, but this was a real, like a real change in the conversation because it went from a pharmaceutical medication that was mostly connected to a large pharmacy called Purdue Pharmacy that ended up being really corrupt in ways about this, to a conversation about a substance that was very close to my story and had a different connotation to it. Philip Seymour Hoffman ends up dying from a heroin overdose. And I started seeing these news articles come out and just seeing this issue unfold in our country after several years of it just kind of being some of the issues that were going on and I feel called again, I felt like it was, it was a signpost to something else in my life. And I knew that I could say something about it. And I felt that those parts of my story that I was as a therapist that I was trying to compartmentalize, were now needing to come out and emerge. So I had an opportunity to work with, um, Mike Ronsisvalle, Dr Mike Ronsisvalle at Florida Counseling Centers. I had the opportunity to work with him and developing an addiction treatment program. And so that was the shift from Denny, the mental health therapist who is trying mostly to run away from being reduced to the substance abuse counselor person. I'm now seeing this need in our society, in my specific community to provide help and healing for people that were struggling with addiction. So that was going on at a larger level in our society. But I had some friends who had overdosed around that time as well. Some people I grew up with who, who lost their lives to this addiction.

Denny: And so I felt this was a personal calling for me to do something with my life and to use, use my skill sets, use my, my mental health license, use my relationships in the community, use everything I had to do something to prevent more overdose deaths.

Jamie: So I know all of this is bringing us closer to present day and what your life looks like now. I think so many people are seeing this word, opioid, are seeing headlines about the opioid crisis and yet it may be somewhat foreign to people still. And so I wonder, can you talk about some of the specifics of what is the opioid crisis? How bad is it? Why is it so deadly?

Denny: Yeah, so the story of the opioid crisis has been told so many times over the past couple years. Almost to the point where now like talking about the effects of it, what it is, how many people have died, all the numbers and stats feels like a sensational story, but it's a real story that's happening and it honestly, it's not, it's not a sensational story. We're going to look back at this time in our country and ask ourselves what happened? How did 70,000 people die in a year? For a handful of years to this specific substance. The only comparison we have to it at of public health level is the HIV/AIDS crisis of the nineties where at the peak of it 52,000 people died, I think it was in 1995. And um, and so like we've mostly all heard about that. And obviously the story of HIV/AIDS spreads beyond the United States. But um, yeah, this thing's a mess. It's definitely, it's a mess. And there's a lot of people trying to do some work to change it.

Denny: And there's some indicators that it's moving in the right direction, both at a federal level and at community levels. But, um, the statistics are continuously getting worse at the same time. In my own community, people continue to die. And so you hear these, these stories at a higher level, you wake up and get the news and see something about fentanyl and heroin overdoses skyrocketing and all the deaths and, and the funding coming from a federal level to help. You hear all these stories and politicians are jumping on board with it. And then you get into the everyday life and you, you hear about a buddy you grew up with, went to school with who, who died from this, or you see a Facebook post that doesn't really tell the full story, but between the lines and the conversations you have on the side, you know the truth.

Denny: And so no one can really talk about this stuff. There's so much shame and stigma associated with it that we don't even know how to fully address some of these root issues related to this, to this crisis because our society doesn't just doesn't know how to have the conversation.

Jamie: And I know that you are trying to do something about this. And so I wonder if you could tell us about the work you're doing now about this thing called Peace Club.

Denny: Yeah. So it was about, about 15 months ago or something like that. I started alongside my brother-in-law, Skyler Vander Molen, this thing called Peace Club, right? And before we had started Peace Club, which 15 months ago didn't have the name Peace Club, I had an idea to - while I was working in Florida counseling centers, I had this dream, I think overall of, of doing something specific with opioid addiction and everything that was going on in our community, I

just, I wanted to specialize my life in this very specific way with opioid use disorder and heroin addiction. So, um, through a series of events and alongside my brother-in-law, we start Peace Club. And Peace Club is a opioid recovery community that offers residential and higher levels of care treatment for people with opioid use disorder and co-occurring disorders. So mental health disorders, specifically trauma and anxiety.

Jamie: Where is it?

Denny: It's in Cocoa Beach, Florida, my hometown. We opened up in the fall of 2017 and uh, we opened up with the mission of helping our community specifically, but trying to create a model that could be, it could be used to do something about the issue in our country with opioids.

Jamie: So specifically what is this work look like now that Peace Club is real and you're doing it?

Denny: Yeah, it looks like offering long-term treatment to people that is so necessary with opioid addiction in their path to recovery. So a lot of the issues that I've seen with the modern treatment center approach, especially in Florida, is that historically it's been your typical, like 30-day, 60-day, maybe a 90-day program and that's partly because of insurance and that game. But that's not enough for people that are in recovery from opioids. They need longer-term support and that doesn't always have to look like a treatment center doing that. But treatment centers we believe need to approach treatment differently and one of those specific differences is by having longer-term treatment for people, even if it means not making the same money that drives a lot of these treatment centers. So, so it's a long-term treatment program that addresses the mental health side of things, the addiction side of things. And um, we are next to the beach so we're literally like 100 yards from the ocean and then about 100 yards from the river. So, we use a lot of our natural environment to create healing in people, which was very pivotal for me. Again, I'm kind of like, I'm kind of creating the best parts of, of my own recovery story and what helped me and fitting it into the context of this very, um, like evidence-based treatment approach that I did not have.

Denny: So yeah, we use a lot of surfing and water, water to create healing in people. And, um, the goal is to build relationships and community within Peace Club and the people that that come to our program so that they can, after they leave our specific programs, that they can continue to have connections in the community through jobs, through NA and AA communities, maybe, and so that they can continue that long journey of recovery.

Jamie: As you have launched Peace Club, as you have committed to this work that is so close to your own story, I wonder, what have you learned? What are you learning? What has been really hard? What's been amazing?

Denny: It is a totally different ball game to come up with an idea from scratch and to build it out into an actual successful idea that can have employees and can pay them and can exist through all the turmoil of the healthcare industry, um, and can navigate through all the drama and the stigma associated with addiction.

Denny: At heart, I'm someone who's trying to help. I'm a licensed therapist who knows a lot about opioid use disorder, but I'm also a business owner and I'm trying to, um, carry out this vision logistically. And so that's hard. It's hard to balance all that. It's hard to see clients and build this community with people in our program and have to lock myself away in the office to, you know, plan 2019 budgeting, et cetera. So it's hard and it's challenging but, but it's all about like building these tracks, is all about, creating healing in our specific community and then moving towards creating healing at a larger level in our society and we don't know what exactly that looks like and how it will always be done. But you have to have a plan and, and you have to act on it. It's not easy.

Jamie: What's been the most rewarding part for you?

Denny: Most rewarding part I would say is, is the stories, the people that came to us and had been actively addicted to opioids for a decade and had, um, a mother bring them in and they felt lost and they weren't sure if they felt hopeful. Um, they felt confused and then they ended up in our program and over time they get a job, they get a bank account, they stay sober, they build relationships in the community. They're becoming like themselves, who they were truly a designed to be. And so seeing that unfold is like, there's really nothing better. I mean, it's rewarding to be able to take an idea just at a business level, like take an idea and materialize it into something that sustainable because that in itself is really hard. But seeing the transformation of a person from quite literally at times, homelessness to being functional, being well, being happy—it's what I'm here for.

Jamie: And I know you're experiencing some surprising open doors in doing this work in having and leading this conversation. And I wonder if you could talk about any of those.

Denny: Yeah. So one of the ones I'm most excited about being a part of right now has to do with this subplot to the opioid crisis story, related to, to people that are incarcerated, who are struggling to return into society. Um, they come in, after being charged with a possession charge or something related to their, their drug use. They're in jail for, you know, it could be, um, a week, it could be several months and sometimes they'll go through detoxes in, in certain jails, but mostly they're not being treated for anything in jail beyond maybe a detox. And then they, they come out into the community, they get thrown right back into it. But the problem that we're seeing is that they're getting thrown right back into it after being sober for however many days, which at a medical and physiological level puts them at a very high risk for overdosing because their tolerance has dropped. And now they're going back on the streets and they're using. So I'm starting to see these stories, people that I've known growing up. Just even yesterday, I get a message on Facebook about a buddy we grew up with who was in jail and came out. And the

first day that he comes out he uses and he dies from overdose. And so I'm super passionate right now about working with some people in the community to change this. And so we're working with the Brevard County Jail, our county that we live in. Um, we're taking some, some, uh, direction from some people who have done similar stuff and we're trying to stop the overdoses that are happening, trying to limit them from people that are coming out of, uh, out of prison and county jails and we're also trying to advocate for people to get treatment instead of being thrown through the system because we don't believe that that is the best path of healing for them.

Denny: And we don't believe that that's the path of healing for, for people in our country. We believe that people need community, relationships, and often treatment to get through this.

Jamie: As you look ahead, as you think about the future, not only with peace club but your own future, what, what do you see? What do you get excited about?

Denny: I'm excited about coming up with creative ways to bring healing to people's lives, to bring healing and families and communities. And so the idea of Peace Club really, it's not limited to opioid use disorder or addiction and mental health issues. Those issues just at this point seem to be the way that our society is being, is being crippled and impacted. So yeah, that's our work right now, but we don't know exactly what the future holds for Peace Club. We're still seeing that unfold. But um at the heart of it is healing and wellness for people. And that can look very different, but, um, we're trying to build a community at a larger level that can experience healing in their own life, whatever that may look like. Maybe it's from opioids, maybe it's from trauma, maybe it's from chronic stress, from, from their executive position at a company, whatever it is, we want to help bring that in a creative way.

Denny: And so we're fascinated by design and we highly value design culture. If you see our office, if you see our residences, they're beautiful residences with a very specific idea behind the design process. Skylar, he was a designer and art director at Facebook and so he brings a lot of gifts in that regard. So we got some talented people who have big aspirations and are very creative and um, so we don't know exactly what all that's going to turn into, but at the core of it it's going to be helping people.

Jamie: So we've got two questions that we love to ask every guest. And the first one is this, what would you say to your younger self?

Denny: You can get through this. There's another way out.

Jamie: And what would you say to someone who's listening right now who is struggling?

Denny: I would say that there are more people than you could imagine who are struggling and there's more people than you can imagine that are getting help and whose lives are changing. And so there's reason to be hopeful and I encourage you to be brave and courageous in sharing

what's going on inside of your mind and what you're feeling because this can't be done alone. It must be done with, with people.

Jamie: Well man, thank you. Thank you for taking the time. Thank you for having this conversation. I try to tell you every so often, but it's, it's a privilege to be your friend. Super proud of you. I'm so amazed and impressed and thankful for the work that you're doing now. So thank you man.

Denny: Thank you.

[music playing]

Lindsay: A huge thanks to Jamie Tworkowski for hosting this week's episode. And thanks to our guest Denny Kolsch. You can learn more about Denny and his work with Peace Club at peace.club. We'll have a link that in our show notes.

We hope each episode is a reminder that your story is important. You matter and you're not alone. We understand that so many of you listening might be struggling or know someone who is struggling with the issues that we've been talking about. We believe that help exist. Part of our mission is to connect people to the help that they need and deserve. You can find local mental health resources at our website, T-W-L-O-H-A-dot-com and click the Find Help at the top of the page. Or if you need to talk to someone right now, you can always connect with our friends at Crisis Text Line. You simply text the word TWLOHA, that's T-W-L-O-H-A, to 741741 and you'll be connected to a trained crisis counselor. It's free, confidential and available 24/7.

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Lindsay: A big thank you to our friends at Copeland for the original music on this episode. This episode was produced by Mark Codgen with editorial support by Claire Biggs of Lore de Force and Becky Ebert, and music assistance provided by James Likeness and Ben Tichenor. I'm Lindsay Kolsch. Thank you so much for listening.

Lindsay: To Write Love on Her Arms is a nonprofit movement dedicated to presenting hope and finding help for people struggling with depression, addiction, self injury and suicide. TWLOHA exist, to encourage, inform, inspire, and also to invest directly into treatment and recovery. You can find more information about TWLOHA at twloha.com.