

Episode 136: Sarah's arrest photo went viral

Content warning – this episode includes discussion of drug use and suicide.

For anyone who creates online content, the big goal is to have your content go viral.

Whether it's a Tiktok or YouTube video, an Instagram reel, or a Facebook photo – when something goes viral, the person who posted it is kind of quasi-famous for a few days or a week.

This happened to me once, several years ago. I posted a video on Facebook, and it just took off like crazy. It wasn't even a video that I created personally. But people saw it and shared it, so it was seen by millions of people – right on my Facebook profile page. So I was getting hundreds of friends requests every day from people I didn't know (and I declined all of them, of course). It was kind of fun, but also a little weird that suddenly my Facebook page was being viewed by so many people, all over the world.

For some people, having their photo go viral is not a good thing. That's what happened with my guest today, Sarah. She got in trouble for selling drugs. This was her first time ever being arrested, and she made the mistake of smiling for her booking photo. That's when things got crazy, and she was nicknamed in the press as the "Adorable Drug Kingpin".

The other reason this story went viral was because of where Sarah's dad worked. His employer was the Drug Enforcement Agency. Sarah's dad was a DEA agent.

Scott

Sarah's parents were divorced, so she ended up living with her mom and her stepdad.

Sarah

I lived with my mom. She was remarried to my stepdad. I lived with them. They had my brother and sister, Grace and Jack. I also have an older brother from the same parents. My dad was remarried to my stepmom, Kristen, and they have three boys. My dad's job with a drug enforcement agency required him to move, travel, and live in all different places in the US and outside of the US, so we were not always very close, and a lot of that was my own choosing.

Scott

She graduated from high school and went off to college. Like a lot of kids at that stage, she didn't know how to manage that new sense of independence.

Sarah

My mom was rather strict just trying to keep me safe. So when I got to college, I realized that I had ultimate freedom - no one to tell me what to do or when to come home - and I just lost control very quickly. Once you have this ultimate freedom, you have that realization of like, "Oh, well, no one will know if I don't come home tonight, or if I do my chores or my homework." There's no one to be accountable for you but yourself. It's easy to just go into your own desires and wishes without thinking of the consequences.

Scott

As a teenager, Sarah was taking medication for a few things, including anxiety. But when she got to college, she thought she could self-medicate.

Sarah

I had been on antidepressants since I was 15 for generalized anxiety disorder and major depressive disorder. I stopped very quickly after getting into college. Once I started to smoke pot, I realized - or I thought - "Well, this makes me feel better, so I don't need to take medication anymore." I stopped taking medication and replaced it with drugs and alcohol.

Scott

And things went downhill pretty quickly...

Sarah

It started with marijuana and it wasn't really much. It helped me relax. It helped me get rid of some anxieties. I started to heavily rely on that as a coping mechanism. So whenever I was sad, or celebrating, or nervous, I started to smoke. About maybe a month after I first started regularly smoking weed, I had tried MDMA.

Scott

MDMA is the drug more commonly known as ecstasy.

Sarah

That was my second illicit substance to try, and that really changed my life. I thought that was incredible. The feeling of being on drugs was something I hadn't experienced before and I quickly just spiraled. Ecstasy - what it's chemically doing is flooding your brain with serotonin and dopamine, which are neurotransmitters responsible for feelings of, like, joy and feeling great physically, mentally, and emotionally. It's just like "high" where everything is good. I mean, nothing bad could ever happen. That's how you feel when you're high on MDMA ecstasy. Once I experienced that for the first time, I was like, "This is how I want to feel every day constantly. This is the feeling I've been searching for as long as I can think."

Scott

And she didn't stop there.

Sarah

I proceeded to take harder drugs from ecstasy. I would say, like, the next step I took was going into psychedelics. So I started using a lot of psilocybin mushrooms and LSD tabs, searching for this realization of like, "If I trip this time, I'm going to have a sudden spiritual awakening." I was just using drugs, trying to fill a void that couldn't be filled by drugs, but I just kept going.

Scott

Sarah was able to continue this direction without it being detected, and part of that was because it wasn't yet having a negative effect on her studies.

Sarah

I was actually doing very well in school at the time. I was at Blinn Community College. In my first semester, I took five classes. In the next semester, I took four. So I was in a normal, like, heavy class

load. I did schedule all my classes to be in the evening. Since it was community college, you could take a 4.30 class. So I pushed everything back to the afternoons. That way I could stay up, get high, get drunk, wake up, and still have time to make it to school. My compromise with myself was if my grades start slipping, I will stop doing drugs. I was able to maintain grades, so I just kept on rolling.

Scott

But as she progressed down this path, she realized that these stronger drugs were more expensive. She needed a way to pay for this habit.

Sarah

In the beginning, I hung around a lot of people who were using drugs, so most of it was for free. I didn't have a job at the time. Once I started to advance into more expensive drugs like LSD or mushrooms, the people I was associated with and choosing to hang around were like, "Well, just sell. You can sell some weed and then it will pay for itself." I thought this was a genius idea. Oh, well, if I'm only selling to college students and people that I know, it's not going to be bad. I'm not selling to kids. That was a really sorry excuse that I used to then proceed into selling narcotics.

Scott

But selling marijuana wasn't enough. Since it's not that expensive, it really doesn't bring in much money.

Sarah

It does not, and I learned that very quickly there. I wasn't making enough money for it to be feasible for me to continue to buy more expensive drugs, so I quickly began to sell cocaine, LSD, and MDMA.

Scott

So now Sarah has actually become a dealer for serious narcotics. She really didn't think that, in the beginning, it would progress to this. She knew she had to stop at some point, but the goal she had set for herself that she wanted to achieve was not what you might expect.

Sarah

No long-term goal to stop. I mean, it's something that I think is very juvenile and naive as, at that time, I really wanted to be able to buy, like, a Honda Ruckus moped that is maybe \$2,000. So my long-term goal was to be able to buy a moped at some point. Like, no plans of running an enterprise or doing this for the rest of my life. It was very much just living in the moment, living for the next high, and hoping to buy a moped along the way.

Scott

From this point, she progressed to taking pills.

Sarah

I started to take Xanax pills, Alprazolam - not anything that you would buy at the pharmacy but pressed Xanax pills. These aren't like pills that were made in a pharmacy where you would buy them if you had a prescription. These were made somewhere within the country, maybe outside of the country, by people who actually have a pill press that is pressing these drugs together. This is not pharmacy-grade material or something that I was prescribed. When I really dove into pills and Xanax, I started— because I didn't like drinking. The only reason I liked to drink is to get drunk. I didn't like to have to go through the whole process of drinking. So whenever I would take a Xanax, I could start to feel like I was drunk. Like, you're just kind of loose and things don't really matter. I quickly started to take it. I started out with taking two,

then three. Towards the end of my drug-using career, which was about two months later, I was taking 8-pressed Xanax bars a day, and the sole reason was to black out. I just wanted to not remember anything I did. It couldn't end positively.

It quickly took over my life and I didn't really know how to get out. I mean, selling drugs isn't, like, a 9-5 job. It's 24/7 because everybody's looking for drugs all the time. This quickly took over and I was at a point where I didn't even know how to get out, even if I wanted to. This advanced to being, like, cool and being invited to all the parties because I thought people wanted to be around me to do something. "I was like I can't control this. I don't even know what to do at this point." So just taking tons of Xanax and blacking out was a lot easier than facing anything that I had gotten myself into during this time.

Scott

Sarah often had drugs in her car and in her apartment. She often felt kind of stressed about that, which probably anyone would be in that situation. But then, she had what she called a premonition.

Sarah

I had been selling at this point for about three months. I had times when I was, like, nervous if I was picking up an ounce of cocaine and driving home with feelings of like, "Ooh, this is a little bit nervous." It was three days before I had this atrocious feeling in my stomach - like there is just something wrong. I was confiding in one of my acquaintance's friends at the time, and he was like, "You're just in your head. It's not a big deal. Nobody would ever come to arrest you. There are bigger people that sell drugs. They wouldn't come after you." - Very ignorant thinking. He was just telling me that I was paranoid, but I can't shake this feeling. Something just feels awful.

Scott

And then, there was a knock at the door on Friday morning at 8 o'clock and it wasn't even that early. I usually think of a drug raid being, they bang on the door at 4 in the morning to wake you up or something, but this was at 8 o'clock in the morning. What happened that day?

Sarah

Yeah, it was November 6th, 2015. It was around 8 o'clock in the morning and it was a Friday, so I didn't have school. I had my Fridays off. I was laying in my bed and I heard that dreaded thuds just like in the movies on my back door. So I kind of woke up out of my sleep and was a little bit confused because I had roommates at the time. If they didn't have their keys, they would knock. I was like, "Oh, it's probably somebody at the house. They just didn't have their keys." So I waited for a second and then I heard another on my back door. So I wasn't thinking that I was being arrested. Like, that did not come to my mind. I was like, "Oh, someone's just being annoying. They want me to wake up and come open the door." I looked out through the peephole and there was a postal person, so I was like, "Okay, I guess they just want to deliver this package." When I opened the door, the postal person moved out of the way and my house was raided by law enforcement.

Scott

They were waiting for you to open that door.

Sarah

They were ready. I guess anyone would open up for a postal person.

Scott

How many cops were there?

Sarah

I can't say for sure. I would say at least 8-9.

Scott

It was a crowd of people ready to come in.

Sarah

Yes, they were absolutely ready for whether I was going to fight, shoot, or run away. They were prepared for all circumstances.

Scott

Did you have any weapons there?

Sarah

No.

Scott

You don't seem like a gun person at all.

Sarah

Not a gun person. I had nothing. I was just a college student standing there in a big T-shirt looking completely shocked.

Scott

You had to be so scared.

Sarah

I was scared, but I guess it didn't feel real. I know, a lot of times people say, "When trauma happens, it feels like a movie," and it did. It felt like I was watching this happen from someone else's perspective. I was shocked. I mean, I couldn't believe that it was happening. They came in with a police search warrant and kind of pushed me into the kitchen. If you walk in from the back door, it was our kitchen. Then, immediately to the left is my bedroom. So I am just standing in the kitchen. About 4-5 officers went into my bedroom, which has all of the narcotics - everything laid out everywhere. I mean, I have some of the crime scene photos from afterward, which I do not enjoy looking at because it was just a mess. I mean, there were bongs all over my apartment. Scales and cocaine were just sitting out on the bookshelf. Everything was in plain sight. This was not an operation where I was ready where things were hidden. All my money was in a Ziploc bag in a Walmart lampshade. So they quickly found everything that they were looking for and gave me the documentation for a search warrant.

Scott

You were like the jackpot for them.

Sarah

It was so easy. I mean, they did not have to search for anything. It was all right there.

Scott

Yeah. In a movie, as soon as the major drug dealer hears the knock on the door, he grabs everything, runs to the toilet, and starts to flush it down the toilet. But with you, it's like, "Nope, here is everything."

Sarah

Yeah. Here it all is. I was not even thinking about getting rid of anything. I wouldn't have time. It looked like what a drug addict's room would look like - not someone who was sophisticated in selling narcotics, but more like a drug addict.

Scott

Can you talk about the evidence that was on your phone?

Sarah

Yes, they pulled over 150,000 text messages off my phone. I did not delete anything ever. I was not cryptic or smart about using code of, like, "Hey, I'm coming to pick up insert-code-word-for-something." It was just like, "Hey, do you have three ounces of cocaine?" I'm like, "Yeah, come by. Here's a picture of it. I'm at my house. Here's my address." I basically put myself on a platter and served it to law enforcement. Here I am and here is everything you could possibly need. They were collecting all the evidence from my room. They took my phone. The warrant included my laptop and me. There were some really nice officers there.

Once they saw my phone, I begged them to please allow me to keep my laptop because all my schoolwork was on there, so they allowed me to keep the laptop, thankfully. They searched the car. We had, like, a policeman who was kind of asking me about everything in my apartment. I was claiming that I didn't know anything, I was scared, I was crying, and confused. I don't know any of these officers' names. They were all really nice considering the circumstances. They asked me if I was a dangerous criminal and I said no. So they allowed me to have my handcuffs up front, which was just a nice gesture that I still appreciate to this day, even though the circumstances were really bad.

I was taken down to College Station Jail and I waited there for about 8 hours until I knew what my charges were. At that point, I wasn't able to make a phone call. It's a very small county. It's a city jail, so it's not even equipped for people to stay. It's like you're just here for a little bit. The investigator came, read out my charges, and told me that I'd be transferred to the Brazos County Detention Center since they were all felonies. Once I was transferred to Brazos County Detention Center, which was about 5.30 PM. You are booked into jail. They took you there. They took off your clothes. They did your search, did your fingerprints. You sat in booking for a few hours. So you're just there in your normal clothes. There are payphones for you to make a free call and there's, like, a list of bail bonds - I didn't know what any of that was.

At this point, I still thought that I could call my friend at the time, that he was going to be able to bail me out, and my parents were never going to know. I thought that we were just going to be able to pay this money, I would get out, and we would keep this a secret. Very ignorant.

Scott

Doesn't it strike you now looking back at "How could I have been so naive?"

Sarah

Every day of my life. I'm still, like, "Naive, stupid, and ignorant. What were you thinking?" I never prepared for the worst outcome or even looked into what that would be. I knew what I was doing was illegal, but I came up with tons of excuses for, "Oh, I wouldn't get caught and I'm not selling that much." A bunch of lame excuses. So I never went through, like, "This is a consequence of what would happen." The fact I thought that my parents wouldn't find out - or the whole world by that - just feels very stupid. I decided to call my mom, let it ring three times, and hung up. I called my dad, let it ring once, and hung up. I did not want to talk to them. I was completely ashamed and embarrassed. How would I explain to them that I was in jail for four felony counts of manufacturing and delivering narcotics? I didn't want to tell them, so I called my friend back at the time and I was like, "Hey, I can't get in touch with them, so I'm going to need you to tell them." This friend is no longer in my life and he had never talked to my parents. I gave him my mom's number to call her and just let her know that I was in jail.

Scott

So she got a phone call from a stranger, saying, "Your daughter's been arrested."

Sarah

Yeah. At that point, it was probably 9.30-10.00 o'clock at night because I was too much of a coward to do it myself.

Scott

How far did your mom live from where you were in jail?

Sarah

She was about an hour away. My dad was living in South America at the time and we didn't have much communication at all for these past few years. They were actually in town because my dad was getting ready to move back from South America to Houston, so my mom was able to get in touch with my dad and they were able to coordinate and then drive up to the jail to see me.

Scott

And you didn't even know they were coming to the jail, right?

Sarah

I did not.

Bill

We happened to be in Texas at that very time, looking for a new home.

Scott

Sarah's father, Bill.

Bill

That morning, I remember it very distinctly. We were just getting ready to fly back to Panama after we found the house that we were going to buy in Cyprus. My wife and I were packing our bags. We had our three boys with us as well - her younger brothers. As I came out of the shower, my wife came to me and said that I had missed a phone call from Sarah's mother, Shawn. I checked the voicemail and it said that she needed to see if I could help out because she had gotten a message from one of Sarah's friends that Sarah got arrested. I was puzzled and shocked, obviously, when I first heard this. Immediately, my thought was, "Maybe, it was a minor in possession of alcohol" because I know the school or Texas is

very stringent about that. Very strict. They would write tickets and arrest people. So I called her back and she said that it had something to do with drugs. Then, again, my thought was, "Well, she must have been around somebody that was in possession of marijuana." I immediately had no instinct to think that she had really gotten herself into some serious trouble. I made some phone calls over to the College Station area through some police contacts that I had. As I talked to one of the detectives who actually was in charge of the case, he was shocked to find out that Sarah's father was a DEA agent and he laid it all out to me. I just remember feeling almost numb. I couldn't believe what was being said to me. It was almost like I was outside my body watching a person receive this news. It was stunning, to say the least.

I'll never forget that feeling of walking into the main area where they have the glass and you can speak to inmates on the other side of the glass. Her mother got there about the same time that I did. As I was standing there, Sarah came walking out from behind a door in an orange jumpsuit with makeup that had run down her face from crying. She was in a very fragile emotional state as all of us were.

Sarah

I got booked into jail after our phone calls and tried to go to sleep. The next day, they came in and let me know that I had a visitor. I assumed it was my friend coming to tell me everything was taken care of and I was going home, and this will forever be the worst moment of my whole life. When I walked into that room in my orange jumpsuit to have a visit through the pane of glass, sat down, and waited for the door to open, it was my parents. I still remember what they were wearing to this day. That was almost seven years ago. I will never forget that. It will likely forever be the worst day of my entire life.

Scott

And you had not seen your dad recently anyway?

Sarah

No. It had been some years since we had seen each other. So it was really— shame isn't a big enough word to summarize how I felt. I wish there was a bigger word than shame. Maybe there is and I just don't know it yet. I haven't found a word to encapsulate that feeling.

Scott

They had to be so confused.

Sarah

Confused, shocked. I blindsided my whole family by never asking for help or giving them any inclination of what I had going on. My dad told me not to panic, that things were going to be okay, and that I was able to post bail to get me out.

Scott

How much was your bail?

Sarah

My bond was \$35,000. The bail is 10%, so \$3,500.

Scott

They said they would get you out, right?

Sarah

Yes.

Scott

They're going to post the bond. Did you just get out right then? Or how long was it?

Sarah

It took about five hours. They were like, "Don't worry. We're working in the process to be able to get you out. Everything's going to be okay." The visit was relatively short because it was traumatizing both of them as well as myself, but mostly them. I didn't want them to continue to have to talk to me through a phone, through a pane of glass.

Scott

So you didn't really have a chance at that point to explain to him about what happened, how you got into this spot, or anything?

Sarah

No. My dad turned into law enforcement mode. Like, he was prepared. He was like, "Look, we're going to get you out. This is what's going on. We're paying the bail. We'll take care of this soon. We're going to see you soon." My mom was obviously just hysterical. She kept putting her hands on the glass and just asking me "Why?" and was crying. She was wearing a Vineyard Vine's pink raincoat. I can still see it, like, clear as day. At that point, I didn't even have answers, which hurt. So I went back to our 8-person tank. I waited a few hours. They came, called me, and told me I was leaving. The process was pretty easy. They gave you the clothes you came in with. I signed the paperwork. They transported you to the bail bonds office. That's where I actually got to, like, physically see my parents for the first time, I guess, not through a pane of glass.

Scott

So you got out and you got in the car with your parents. What's that conversation like?

Sarah

One of the most challenging moments that will forever be a pivotal point for my life to change completely. It was something that my dad said to me that I can't forget and I think it's important not to. His exact words were, "You made a monumental fuck up, but your life is not over. The next part is going to be even harder because now I need you to be 100% honest with us about everything. That's the only way it will get better." I was not wanting to share all of those details with my parents, but it was what was necessary.

Scott

And your dad had some special insight of this because of his work with the DEA, right? He kind of knew how this all worked.

Sarah

He does it from, like, an arresting officer's perspective, but not anything that happens after. He was working on much larger investigations, so he's like, "I knew that people went to jail. What happened after that wasn't my business. In my mind, those people put themselves in jail and it sucks for you." Once it became his family, I know it provided a different insight. He knew how the next proceedings were going to work and he was like, "It will only work if you are 100% honest."

Scott

This gave him a little bit of a different perspective.

Sarah

Definitely.

Scott

But I love the fact that his reaction to this is incredible. "This is my daughter. I have to do something." He wanted to help you, rather than, "Okay, you screwed up. You did this to yourself."

Sarah

That's what I would've expected and understood - for them to be like, "Look, we're not getting you out of jail. You put yourself in this situation" - especially with my dad. I mean, I was so horrible to this person for years, behind petty family stuff, being a teenager and a jerk. I was not kind to my dad and it was not any of my dad's doing. My dad always tried to reach out and make things better and try to mend things, but I was unwilling because I was a kid and selfish. I mean, for both my parents to be there and my dad to stand by me with those words of "This is a monumental fuck up, but it's not over" continue to resonate in my life. Even when I do make mistakes, him standing beside me through all this will mean more than I think anything that anyone could ever do.

Scott

So you went back home and that's when you saw the booking photo?

Sarah

Yes.

Scott

Tell me about this. This is a booking photo, not a mugshot. What's the difference?

Sarah

So your mugshot is when you first come into any sort of, I guess, jail. When I got to College Station jail, it was like how you see in the movies where you're going to stand to the side, they're going to take a side picture of you, and you're going to stand to the front and take a front picture. So that had all happened in the first place I was at. Once I was transferred and it went through booking again, they did your fingerprint and asked you questions.

They said I was taking a booking photo and they explained that this was for an ID that you carry around the jail, which is true. It's like a little printed-out piece of paper to prove that this is you and your spin number. So when I took that photo, I thought of it as an ID photo and I smiled. It was just something I guess that was natural to do in a picture. I was scared out of my mind and confused at this point, but that is the photo that was attached to every article ever. I was smiling because I thought that it was funny and that my dad would get me off on everything, which could not be further from the truth, but it's how it looked.

Scott

Right. It looked like you weren't taking it seriously.

Sarah

Absolutely.

Scott

We'll have that picture on the website in the show notes. But yeah, it looks like when the press got this photo— obviously, mugshots and booking photos are public. It's all public information. They must have people that go through these things and just find some stories that are unusual and look for these photos. But when they saw your picture and you were a young 19-year-old girl smiling for the camera like an Instagram influencer or something with the article that went with all of this huge variety of drugs that were found in your apartment, you got nicknamed the "Adorable Drug Kingpin." Do you remember what you thought the first time you read that?

Sarah

I do. It was a KBTX article, which was the one at College Station. That was the first one that came out, and that was before I got that atrocious nickname. It was "College student arrested in apartment for selling methamphetamine," which was not the case - technicality thing. The first time I saw it, I remember going downstairs and waking up my mom because I was so upset that it said "methamphetamine" like that mattered. I was like, "But that's not the case! It's not like that." She made me understand that how it progresses from there is they can say whatever they want and it just spiraled from there to Houston Chronicle to being picked up by Death and Taxes, which is, I think, who gave me the nickname. It just then took on a life of its own.

Scott

It literally went viral.

Sarah

It went viral everywhere. I've read every article, every comment, every Facebook share. I read all of it.

Scott

That's probably the worst thing you could do for your own mental health.

Sarah

Right. The absolute worst thing. My dad kept telling me, "Just don't look." I get it objectively to just not look at it. But when I tried to put it in perspective, I was like— imagine if you were working and there was a group of coworkers that were gossiping about you, most of us would want to know, like, "Well, what were they saying?" I just couldn't stop looking and the comments, understandably, were not kind. I just absorbed all of them, which led me to a very dark place.

Scott

You were already feeling down, vulnerable, and not knowing what's going to happen in my life right now. Now, it seems like everyone hates you. What were some of the messages? You even got emails, right?

Sarah

Yes. When your worst mistake is broadcasted for the entire world to give their opinions on, understandably, I wasn't expecting anyone to be rooting for me. The emails ranged from, "I hope you overdose in your own vomit. Fucking kill yourself," to strange people offering to marry me, which was

weird. But most of it was, "Go fuck yourself. Hang yourself. Do everybody a favor. She needs prison for the rest of her life. Fire her dad. Make sure her mom loses her job." It strayed into my family although it's my mistake. Somehow, it's my parents' responsibility. I was ready to end my life behind it because I genuinely thought that they would leave my family alone if I just killed myself and took the easier way out of the situation.

Scott

Did you voice that? The suicidal ideas to your parents?

Sarah

Not immediately. It took a while before I mentioned it. It was in those five years of waiting. When I told my stepmom, I was like, "I can't do it. I can't handle this because it went viral. It would continue to come up. Any time I had a status hearing or anything, it would come back up in the news again. I can't do this anymore. I think it's just better if I kill myself." She was like, "You can't. That's not an option. You have to think about everyone else and how that would affect them." Truly, at that time, I thought it would be better if I just wasn't here. It would stop the people from accusing my dad of things, coming after my mom, and questioning my siblings about this at school if I just wasn't here. My stepmom made it very clear like, "That's not an option. You would destroy our lives forever. So you can't."

Scott

So you were out on bond and you didn't really know how long you were going to be out.

Sarah

Correct.

Scott

How did this affect your school - because you were still in school?

Sarah

Yes, I was in school. I was arrested in November. I got out and I continued class. I had to have a disciplinary meeting because I was arrested even though it wasn't on school grounds. I guess its policy is not to be arrested. So I had a discussion with the disciplinary board and they told me that I was fine to proceed and continue to go to school. It was December. I was taking the finals. I registered for the next semester to continue at Blinn. One day, I was switching around some classes and I got a notification that I had a hold on my account, which typically happens if your tuition didn't process or you have an unpaid textbook. I went and checked in, and said I had been expelled until 2025. At that point, it was 2015. So I called the disciplinary board - the lady I had met with - and I was like, "Hey, this says I'm expelled." She's like, "Yeah, well, they had a secondary meeting and they decided that you cannot come back. So you can finish out the next, like, 8 days I had left of school, and then you cannot return."

Scott

And they had already told you that you could continue school unless you got convicted.

Sarah

Yes. And continue school. So I was ready for the spring semester. At that point, I was commuting back and forth because I was evicted from my apartment. I was ready to start spring so I could continue college to get ready to transfer. I tried to transfer into A&M but it was cut short.

Scott

You said you got evicted from your apartment. Obviously, there must be a rule in the apartment about no drug dealers.

Sarah

Yeah. Don't commit felony crimes. You cannot live here.

Scott

You can't argue with that policy, really.

Sarah

No, not at all. I get it.

Scott

So your current status at this point is you're living with your mom. You're in therapy, I understand. You're back on your regular medication, and you're staying sober. Did you feel like things had— I mean, obviously, it was still up in the air about what was going to happen with the charges, but did you feel like you had turned the corner and started on the right track now?

Sarah

It felt like I was on the way, obviously, to something better. I wasn't quite sure what that was. Being clean from drugs was very challenging at first, but I understood that it was not an option to go back. I can't and I did not want to go to jail for anything new and bring more stuff on my family. So I started to feel, I guess, better. It's still kind of a confusing time. I'm learning to navigate and deal with the issues that I ignored for over a year with doing drugs. An important lesson I learned is getting high and escaping doesn't fix those problems. So when you get sober, it's time to deal with all of them. So I was dealing with a lot of self-esteem issues and trauma from what I had caused for myself and my family. But I did start to feel like I was in the right direction. It was time to look for something else.

I had that semester off that spring, so I applied to Texas State, Sam Houston, and A&M because my goal was to be an Aggie and follow in my older brother's footsteps. I really wanted to be an Aggie. So I set the application, turned it over to my higher power, and was like, "Look, if that door's not for me, close it and I'll know and I'll move on to a new goal." It was February 17th when it came in the mail that I was accepted and got into A&M. I was very excited to tell my parents. At first, they're happy, like, "Oh my gosh! you got in!" And then, we were quickly like, "Well, why would we send you back? Why would you go back to the exact spot where you were and were involved in drugs and derailed your life? Do you really think that's a good idea?" So they took some time to think about it, understandably, while I just pleaded with them to please let me go back.

Scott

When they were saying "go back", this was not just going back to the college environment. You were going back to the same city, pretty much, right?

Sarah

Same city.

Scott

Did that worry you at all like it worried them? I

Sarah

I understood why. I was just riding on this, like, I cannot believe I got in. I still question who reviewed the application and didn't recognize the name. And to that person, I'll forever be grateful. I couldn't believe I got in. It was something I wanted so badly and I couldn't believe I'd gotten there. So after some weeks of annoying my parents and begging them to allow me to go back, I was like, "I'll put the tracking and the Find My Friends." There's another app, not just Find My Friends. It's more intense where they can, like, track your location throughout the whole day. I was like, "I'll live on campus. I really want to do this." My dad made it clear and he's like, "If we give you this opportunity, if there is a single mess up or a minor possession, if you're drunk and disorderly, you're coming home and that's it. You can pay for community college. We're not doing this again." Understandably, I mean, they already paid for me to try to go the first time and I messed it up. So they put a lot of faith in me and that is my driving force to go there and do what I needed to do.

Scott

You had a lot of incentive to be successful this time.

Sarah

Yes. And not to allow anything to take me off course.

Scott

The thing that's kind of unusual about this is, from the time you were arrested and got out on bond, it was quite a long time, even enough time for you to go to college and graduate.

Sarah

Correct.

Scott

That's very unusual, isn't it?

Sarah

It is. It was five years total with the insurmountable amount of evidence I left behind - the 120,000 plus text messages that aided in my case, taking longer to get up the docket - and having an attorney whose goal was like, "We just need to keep pushing it back. The more time you allow, the better." In my mind, I just wanted it over with. I was like, "No, I just want to get this over with." It's like this looming cloud and a million bricks on my shoulders. I just want to know what the outcome is going to be. He was like, "The best thing to do is wait. We're not going to push the issue until they bring it up."

Scott

And you weren't going to trial because you had already confessed to everything. This was just a sentencing hearing.

Sarah

Correct.

Scott

So you were waiting and they were pushing this back and back even though you wanted it to be over with - that was really to your advantage, right? Because you got to show all the people that are going to be at this sentencing hearing how well you're doing now. You had 5 years to show them that.

Sarah

Yes, it worked to my advantage. Being objective, I can see why it was the better option. The more distance I'm able to put between myself, the more accomplishments I'm able to show. Like, "Hey, it's been five years. I graduated from Texas A&M. I immediately got a full-time job. I've been promoted at my full-time job. I'm on the right track and I've been sober." So it was a lot of time to prove that I had changed.

Scott

What kind of work were you looking to do?

Sarah

I majored with a Bachelor of Science in psychology. I was hoping to eventually have an LPC for a licensed professional counselor. During that time, I knew what my charges were, but I remained hopeful that I would end up pleading down to something smaller and not taking a felony charge because, in the state of Texas, with a felony, you cannot hold any sort of state license. I wanted to work in a rehab or something that allowed me to help people and try to prevent teenagers from ending up and putting themselves in the situation that I did. So that was the career path. But having a criminal background makes it incredibly difficult to get a job. So I took the first job I was offered out of college, which was being a receptionist at the company I currently work for now. I had a little bit of an ego, thinking of like, "Oh, I have a degree. Tons of places will want to hire me. I'm from a great college," but a criminal background will outweigh a college degree every time, which is fair. If I owned a company, I don't think I would be like, "Give me everyone who's a felon. That's who I want to interview." It made it very challenging, but I'm very blessed that this company took a chance on me and allowed me just to start by answering the phones. I've been promoted now 4 different times since I've been employed there. I was able to start making more money and have more responsibilities and start an adult career. It's not in the degree field I wanted to be in or the career field, but I knew how important it was to have a job.

Scott

Yeah, that's a big factor they consider when you go to your sentencing.

Sarah

Absolutely. And you don't get to be picky when you have a background. You just take what you can get and be grateful for that.

Scott

If you go in for different things, you must have had to take some time off work and they were okay with all that?

Sarah

Yes. The company was very understanding of my circumstances which I'm very grateful for. When I would have a court appearance, they'd understand I'd have to take half a day to drive up to College Station and sign paperwork that I'm waiting or I didn't run away. When Covid hit, that pushed my court almost back a year. So that allowed me to have a little more time of not having to go in person, but they were very understanding of my legal situation.

Scott

When the day of your sentencing came in December of 2020, what did you expect your sentence to be, or what was the maximum you could have gotten?

Sarah

I know with first-degree felonies, the maximum you can be sentenced with is up to 25 years. Like that's the statute for the felony itself. There were a lot of feelings on all sides of how it would go. My attorney was hopeful it would be probation. I was not that hopeful. I didn't think that it could go that way. I didn't think it was going to be prison. I assume maybe 6 months in county jail or doing weekends where, like you work, you go check yourself in on Friday, you stay till Sunday, you leave, and I could just do a year or two of weekends. I was hopeful that I would not go to prison.

Scott

You were hopeful for that, but I understand that when you went to the hearing, you were prepared for the worst. How did you prepare for that?

Sarah

I had one credit card at Marshalls, so my finances were taken care of. I had my phone shut off. I drove my car up to the court hearing along with my parents. Since it was Christmas time, I had everybody's Christmas presents wrapped and separated in the back of my car, my car title, and all financial documents so that if things went the wrong way, my family had their Christmas gifts, my car and all that stuff was as taken care of as it could be.

Scott

Because if you knew, whatever you were sentenced to, if you had to go to prison, you would be remanded into custody that day after that hearing.

Sarah

Immediately.

Scott

What was your sentence? I was sentenced to 8 years in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to run concurrently, which is where they all run at the same time. I had three counts of 8 years and then a 2-year state jail felony, and it was all to run at the same time. So it's together, but it was still 8 years in prison.

Scott

What did you think when you heard 8 years?

Sarah

I had to go back to look at the court transcript so that I could— because I'm sick, weird. Like, who would want to read that again? Me. But I wanted to remember it the best I could because, at that moment, I thought things went okay in the sentencing hearing because, like, first, the prosecution goes and presented their mountain of evidence and I was like, "Oh my God, I just want to run away." When we were on lunch break, I was like, "Just let me run. I'll run and just get it as far away as I can, and they catch me." My dad's like, "No, it was their turn. They make things obviously look as bad as they can be. It's our turn afterward. So I had one of my bosses testify. My therapist testified. My dad testified. And I

ended up testifying. I took the stand and thought that would help somehow. I thought things went okay. In my mind, I thought that me taking accountability for my choices and being able to show what I had done would be enough for them to allow me to do county jail time - something that would allow me to maintain the life I had built for myself.

I remember what the judge said. He said prison is for 3 things - to reform, to deter from future actions, and for punishment. He said, for reform, you've shown yourself to be reform. It's been five years. I haven't committed another crime. You have a job to deter from future action. Obviously, you haven't made the choice again. I think it made a pretty big impact on what making this choice again would do. So I was feeling hopeful. Then, he said, "But for punishment, what you did was wrong. You got up here and you admitted that you knew it was wrong and you did it anyway. So I'm sentencing you to eight years in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to be remanded now." My parents were there. I was in another horrible moment. My mom was crying and begging them not to take me away. My dad and stepmom were there too. My therapist and his mom were just like, "Hey, it's going to be okay. It's going to be fine." At that point, it just felt like circus music going on in my head, like, "What is happening?" I mean, I was prepared to do county jail. I had no idea what prison was going to be like.

Scott

Yeah, that's a whole other story.

Sarah

Yeah. It was not an experience that TV or movies can prepare you for. It's absolutely one of a kind.

Scott

So you were taken into custody...

Sarah

Taken into custody at the courthouse. They were nice enough to let me hug my parents one more time, take off my Aggie ring and my earrings to give them so I didn't have to bring that into the jail to go into property because things can get lost. I went back and went through the booking process again. Fingerprints. When I took my booking photo, I did absolutely not smile this time. I kept it sad.

Scott

You learned that lesson.

Sarah

Yeah, I stayed sad. Just authentic sadness. Since this was Covid, I had to spend the first two weeks in solitary, which is by myself in a cell about the size of this closet for 23 hours a day and you come out for one to use the phones. That was my first mental challenge. Definitely difficult to be in such a small space with your own thoughts in jail.

Scott

What do you do all that time? Did you have books or anything? What could you do?

Sarah

I did have books. My family sent in some books. We were able to pass books from one cell to the other by sliding them out and attaching them to something heavier like a tray. So people would pass books to each other. I was reading whatever it was I could read. I didn't care about the genre. I was not picky. So

after two weeks, I moved into a general population, which was my first time being in the general population. There were a lot more people, a lot more space, and just kind of adjusting to jail. So you're in the county jail until the TDCJ, Texas Department of Criminal Justice assigns you a number that night. They will let you know. At 2 o'clock in the morning, pack your stuff up. You're pulling chain and you're going to prison. I didn't pull chain.

I was in county jail for almost, I think, 35-to-40 days before I pulled chain and went to prison. I met some nice people that were in there that kind of prepared me. I was looking for all the advice I could get. I had only seen Orange as the New Black, so I was like, "I don't want people to beat me up or steal my stuff. Like, how do I avoid getting in fights like you see on the tv? How do I not want to be forced into a gang?" All these preconceived notions that I quickly learned - it's not like that.

Scott

You mentioned Orange is the New Black and this is what it seems like, though - the naive non-St. Street Smart Girl heading to the big tough prison. You shouldn't have watched that show.

Sarah

I watched it again once I got out to see how accurate it was. I was like, "No, not like that." I don't even know how to explain it. It's very overwhelming. Getting there, the first unit you go to— I don't know if all I would assume other states are like this but, in Texas, all women are processed through the exact unit. It's one unit. It's the diagnostic unit where you're going to go. You take your IQ test. They're going to check your mental and physical health. That way, they can assign what jobs you're going to have and the next unit that you'll go to. So I was at the processing unit for almost three months, and that was a mind fuck of its own, just adjusting to prison.

I was still struggling with, like— how you put something into words because everything is stripped of you. Like, you're not called a name. My number was 2334173. That's what they're going to call you or your bunk number. I had a lot of different bunks, so it's dehumanizing. You're on their schedule. You wear their clothes - the prison clothes that are assigned to you. You work at the job. They tell you when you get up and when you go to bed at 10 o'clock. 10 o'clock is lights out. The free time is in a room with 60 other people. Breakfast is at 4 o'clock in the morning. Lunch is at 10.30. Dinner is around five. You don't have any control over your day. You do what you're told. You don't ask questions and keep your head down and do what you're told.

I didn't mind listening to doing what I was told, but it was on a whole other level. Yeah. It was intense to find a way to make it work and not be miserable. I mean, my go-to in the free world was, typically, that I would just kill myself. You're not going to be able to kill yourself in there. The only way is if you starve yourself, and no one's going to do that. So I had to accept that there was no way out. The only way out was through. If that meant 8 years, that meant 8 years, which was dreadful to think about. I was lucky enough to bunk with a lot of really kind women that gave me great advice on how to do time and not lose yourself or lose your sanity.

Scott

That's one thing that I would wonder about. The people that you came into contact with there— this is prison, so a lot of them are in for a long time and they've done really bad things. Did you meet other women who you were scared of attacking you? Or did you kind of congregate with the ones who wanted to help you?

Sarah

Some advice I got, which remained true, from people was, "In county jail, you'll find your people. You'll find people that are like you, sit on your bunk, and read your book. Don't get a girlfriend, which is the reason why there are fights." Almost every fight I saw is behind girlfriends and someone that you're dating or that someone passed a note to somebody. So I just stayed on my bed and stayed quiet. I did end up meeting like-minded people and we would start talking about a book. It's big to have pictures. So, if you're fortunate enough that your family sends you pictures, we would share pictures. Women really do come together even in a place like that where not everybody was nice and some people were a little bit rough around the edges, but there was a sense of community in the strangest way of, like, if someone came and they didn't have money on their books, they weren't making store.

People would all come together and chip in to get them noodles, to get everyone something because you didn't want to see people go without because prison is not the place where you want to not have anything for yourself. So there were moments of humanity that I saw even in an inhumane place that gave me hope. It was like a standard rule that you don't ask why people are there. It's just not your business, which is a really important rule that I learned going into prison, that is to mind my own business. Something I still sometimes struggle with is being a little bit nosy. So I learned to just not worry about what anybody else has going on unless they want to talk to you about it. I did bunk with people. One of them had done some pretty horrific crimes, but I learned it's not my place to judge and it's not my business. I just base it on how people treat me there. If you treat me kindly, I'm nice to you. Just keep it at that level.

Scott

So your next hope was to get out on parole. When did that come up? How long were you in? Or how much time did you have to do before you were eligible?

Sarah

I had to do 14 months. The way parole works is— depending on your time. My crime was not aggravated. So, for an 8-year sentence, I was eligible to see the parole board after 10 months. So I prepared for that by staying out of trouble, not breaking any of the rules, and not having any cases. I was able to be promoted to trustee status, which looked good for parole, but I was trusted to work outside of the yard. I did outside yards like mowing, weeding, and eating all around the prison. Your family can write in and write letters and your work people can write in to speak on your behalf that you have support when you get out. You can be seen 6 months before and you don't know when you're seen because you actually never see a parole board. You don't see anybody. You'll have an interview with, like, an officer that will ask you questions like, "How do you feel about crime? Are you sorry for your crime? What do you plan to do if you get out?" And they'll pass that info along. But really, it will be three different people in an office that you will never meet who will decide if you go home that year or if you have to wait another 365 days for an option to go home.

Scott

That's got to be such a common misconception because I'm picturing you sitting in a folding chair facing 3 people at a long table and you're just pleading your case, like, "I'm all better now." But you don't even see these people.

Sarah

You never see them. You can write letters - I wrote a letter. I have no idea if they see it, but you have to relinquish control over what happens - that was one of the biggest lessons I learned in prison. I couldn't

control it. All I could do was what I was responsible for, so I stayed out of trouble, went to my job, and did exactly what I needed to do. That was the only thing I could put in for what the parole board would see. Otherwise, you're really just a file that comes across their desk. One person votes and, typically, everyone else votes on the first person's vote and onto the next one.

Scott

You must have deliberately tried to not get your hopes up. Do you think you had any chance?

Sarah

Well, for my first 6 months, I did ask a lot of other people. I asked everybody that I met, "Do you think I'm going to make parole? Do you think I'm going to make parole?" And the majority of people were like, "No, you have an 8-year sentence. There's no way you'll make your first parole." So I was like, "This is hopeless. I'm not going to go home." It's very challenging there not to think about, like, even though you're in prison and this is your life, the world keeps turning. Your family keeps waking up, getting older, having birthdays, having Christmases, and you're just missing it. I was very neurotic at the beginning behind everything I was missing. Every birthday, every Easter, anytime a holiday came, I was like, "I'll never get this back. I'll never be with my family at this point in time to see them where they were at." Some of my siblings were reaching pretty big milestones. My only sister had her 16th birthday and it crushed me that I was not there to see it. But I got very wise advice from someone that was like, "You have to stop thinking about them. Your world is in these four walls. That's all you have. Your world is getting up, going to your job, and going to chow. You can love your family, but you can't control it. The more involved you try to be, it will make you crazy, and it does. Like, I just focused on, "I can't get to them. What if they get in an accident? When will I ever find out?" I mean, that stuff will drive you to a not-safe space. So, I didn't want to get my hopes up, but at the same time, I was just desperate that the answer was yes. Like, I could not lose hope that it could be Yes.

Scott

It seems like when you write the letter to them, you have to strike some kind of balance. Like, you want to tell them the whole truth, but you also want to kind of think, "Okay, what do they want to hear? Do I need to write that in the letter?" Were you thinking about that?

Sarah

Yeah. It was hard not to. I don't want to come across as, "I don't deserve to be here because, whether I think it's true or not, I'm here because I committed a crime and it's wrong." But I'm also like, "Well, but what does everybody write? Everyone's going to write that they don't deserve to be there. What is the right thing for these people that I will never meet?" So I kept my letter just pretty basic and took ownership of my choices and everything I had learned just in those 10 months of being in prison and hoped that it would be enough. I had seen it take months for people to have an answer and seen it take less than a week. Whenever I had my parole board hearing, my family was notified because your family is able to zoom in - only one family member - and I think it's cut down to, like, 10 minutes. It's quick, which I understand because there are hundreds of thousands of inmates. Like, they don't have time to hear everybody's story. So my dad let me know. He is like, "Hey, I think it went well."

Scott

Wait a minute. Your dad— who was in this Zoom meeting?

Sarah

It's one parole person that will vote. My mom was able to be there and my boss was able to basically, like, stand in to show, like, "Hey, this person has support. When they get out, they can come live with me. They're going to have a job." These are things that are important because they want to know. They're not giving you a bus ticket to be, like, good luck. They want to know you have support. So my dad thought it went well, which I was, like, "Well, did they say anything?" He's like, "No. They just listened." I'm like, "Dad, I needed you to find out somehow, like, what they were going to say." He's like, "She seemed nice." I was like, "Okay." I knew her name - they told me - so I prayed for her and just turned it over the best that I could.

Scott

It really seems like it's almost better that those people could be on Zoom with this one parole person instead of you trying to plead your case.

Sarah

Yeah, I understand. I wish they'd give you a list of options because, like, what if I didn't have family? There are plenty of people who did not have a support system and I'm like, "Then no one gets to go and you're just a manila folder that they look at for two seconds and they're like, 'next.'" It's not fair and it made me feel guilty at times for having support when I would see people who didn't. It made me very grateful for my family, but it also just sucks knowing that some people don't have people and that's an incredibly lonely place to be - to not feel supported, seen, remembered, or that you're not just lost in a cage somewhere and no one's thinking about you.

Scott

How did you find out the result?

Sarah

I called my friend. So I have a very close friend who's cat-sitting for me right now, and I called him first. I used to call every day and try to find out if something was going on. I know I drove him nuts because every time the answer was "No, there wasn't anything new," my demeanor would change completely and I was devastated.

Scott

How would this friend know before you knew?

Sarah

It's posted online. By finding out online, you'll find out about a month sooner than it would get to you in jail that you made parole.

Scott

So you didn't have access to check it online?

Sarah

No, nothing. Just calling.

Scott

So that was probably a pretty regular phone call for you.

Sarah

Yes. And I was like, "Is there anything online? Is there anything new?" I knew it hurt as badly for my family as it hurt for me because it's hard not to be envious while you're there because like I learned that even though I'm the one in prison, everybody is doing time. We're all doing time together because my family wants to help me and they can't. I want to be with my family and I can't get there. So I had to learn to not be as selfish and be like, "Well, I'm the one who's in prison. You guys don't understand." I learned, like, they do understand because, as badly as they want to give me this news, it's just not here yet. I had to be patient.

One day, when I got up, I was feeling really crappy. I didn't have work, so I slept until like noon and I didn't get out of my bed. I called and I was just, like, in a funky mood knowing that the answer was going to be no. I could just hear the difference in his voice. He said, "Are you ready to come home?" I said, "What are you talking about?" And he's like, "You made parole." So what everybody had told me in prison was like, "Don't let people know you made it. Don't let anybody know you made it. People will try to take that from you because if people know you're going home, they could get in a fight with you or place contraband in your space. Don't let people know." So I tried to remain calm and I was like, "Okay, I got to call my dad."

I called my dad and he's like, "I can't wait to see you. You're coming home." And I'm like, "Okay. But when?" Because you get an answer, which is an immediate release, a delayed release, or you can be released to a program. I had an FI2, which was a delayed release, but I didn't know when it was going to be. So that was the next hurdle. I found out I made parole, but finding out when I'd be going home took— I found out on October 1st that I made parole, but I did not leave until January 7th.

Scott

Oh, that's a long time.

Sarah

Yes.

Scott

And you kept it a secret from the other people that whole time.

Sarah

As long as I could. Because as what people said about, I guess, like— depending on the facility you were at this. My last facility was a smaller group of people, so there were only 18 of us in a room. When you spend almost 24 hours a day with 18 people - I had been there for 7 months - you get to know each other even if you don't like each other. Sometimes people don't like each other, but you live in the same space. There is 1 phone, 2 showers, and 4 toilets. So you learn to get along. My acquaintances in prison picked up on it pretty quickly that I had made it, so I pulled them into the bathroom to try to have a private space to tell them that I had made parole. They were really excited. So they started screaming and crying and then everybody found out. But I was really lucky to be in a space where everybody was excited for each other when we found out someone was going home. So I was glad I didn't have to hold on to that for all that time. I don't think I could. I was very excited but also wanted to be humble as not everybody makes parole. The last thing I wanted to do was put that in someone's face that I was leaving and they weren't.

Scott

Can you talk about the day that you left prison? Did your parents come and pick you up?

Sarah

I had my friend come get me because only 1 person is allowed to come. So, like, your whole family can't be there for a reunion. None of that. I didn't want to have to pick between my dad and my mom, so my friend came and picked me up. I got out on the 7th. Once I found out on the 2nd of January, it was just a few days, so I was like, "Hey, you're going home in 4-5 days. Oh my God, this doesn't feel real." So for the next four days, my friends and I drank a lot of coffee to stay awake and, like, tell stories and be silly. One of my friends got up early, braided my hair for me, and did my makeup so that I would feel nice when I was leaving. I had all my belongings packed up, but it just didn't feel real. Like, I couldn't believe I was actually leaving until I'd stepped out of those gates as a free person. They came and got me around 10 o'clock and they're, like, "Bunk 4. ATW," which means all the way. Like, you're going all the way out of the gates. So I packed up my stuff and walked out. They take you to the front. They look through things again, I guess, to make sure you're not taking anything. I don't know what you would take out of prison that they might want, but they checked to make sure.

Scott

If there's anything illegal, they probably want you to take it out, right?

Sarah

I mean, I would think so. I'm not sure what they're looking for, but that's fine. They looked through my things. My friend was able to come in and give me clothes. That's when it felt real - when I got to go into the bathroom, not accompanied by an officer for the first time in 14 months, and change by myself in privacy and not get strip searched and to put on, like, real underwear and a bra. Life-changing. I was like, "Oh my gosh. Real clothes that aren't made of, like, thick canvas."

Scott

Institutional clothing, yeah.

Sarah

Yes. It's not great quality. They don't put a lot of, I guess, funding towards women's clothing when you're in prison. I get it, but still. I walked out the gates, out the front door, and they said, "Don't come back." I left and got in the car. The first place I went to eat was McDonald's. Most people are like, "Oh, I want to go get steak." Like, that's what I thought for a long time. But as soon as I got in the car, I was like, "Go to the nearest fast food place, please. I don't care what it is. I just want to eat garbage food in the real world." It was about 10.30 in the morning when I had chicken nuggets, fries, and milk.

Scott

So you had real garbage food rather than prison garbage food.

Sarah

Oh, the prison food... I'm an extremely picky eater. Like, I still eat like a 12-year-old still. I'm trying to branch out now, but prison food is terrible. So I didn't care what it was. I was like, "Just something that isn't like mystery meat or something questionable if it's even edible," and it was McDonald's.

Scott

So you're out on parole now, but there are conditions. It's not like you're just a free person forever. What are some of the conditions of your parole?

Sarah

Correct. When you're granted parole, you're essentially doing the rest of your time in the free world. I will be on parole until December of 2028. So you come out and you go report to your parole officer. Depending on what your crime is, if it was violent or if you had certain crimes while having certain classes, if you had an aggravated charge, you might be required to take an anger management class.

So I had to report to my parole officer, and since I had a drug-related offense, I was required to take a UA every week for the first two months and then go from there. So each week, I'd go in and do a UA test. I had—

Scott

Urine analysis?

Sarah

Correct. So just a drug test to make sure that you're clean. I can't go anywhere where the main source of revenue is alcohol. There are a lot of situations that you could no longer, I guess, put yourself in or I won't risk putting myself in.

Scott

And you had to come out to a job, right? Or you had to get a job?

Sarah

Yes. I was fortunate to come back to the company I had previously worked for before becoming incarcerated. They had a job for me. So I was able to start full-time employment right away. When you're released on parole, you obviously can't be released to your own house because you don't have one, so you have to parole to somebody's house. So I paroled to a friend's house while I got situated to get my own apartment, and that took about 9 months. Once I had money and I started to look for an apartment, that was another challenge. A lot of places don't want you to live there when you have a background, which was a little bit discouraging at first because I would get really excited just to be told no.

Once I found the place I lived at now, I was able to explain to the property manager. I just asked if I could have a conversation with her and tell her a little bit about my situation. Thankfully, she was really kind and understanding and was like, "I get it. We all make mistakes." So now, I have my own place. Navigating friendships has been hard. I have one very close friend who's here. Over the past three months, I've started to try to make friends. I'm just incredibly wary of everyone and what they might be doing, not that they would intentionally do something to me, but most people drink or smoke pot. I mean, I know I would if I could, but I can't be around it. I can't run the risk of being in someone's car and they forget they have weed in it. If we were pulled over, I'd go back to jail and my parole would be revoked. I isolated myself for the first probably 6 months. It was hard being, I guess, a young adult because the crowd that likes to go to a bar, to go to a club, or to go have drinks learned that's not what I do. I'm sober. I don't drink alcohol. Meeting people has been hard.

Scott

I would imagine it would almost border on paranoia, being so concerned that you don't accidentally—you were originally sentenced to 8 years and you did 2 years, but you're doing your whole sentence. It's just that the last 6 are out on parole. That's why it's 2028.

Sarah

Yes, I did 14 months inside. I guess I've gone for two years now, but it's still parole. If you violate that parole and commit a new charge, you will go back, you will not see parole, and you will serve the remainder of your sentence in prison. So, it's just not worth it. My dad and my stepmom helped me a lot in making friends. I always run everything by them, like, probably too much.

Scott

I'm sure they don't mind.

Sarah

Thankfully, my stepmom is a great sport when I call about literally everything, all the time for advice. My dad helped me out in like, "I was invited by some friends to go to this, but there could be people there drinking. What if somebody that I'm with starts acting crazy because they're drunk and it draws attention?" My dad's like, "Okay. understand that you're being careful, but I don't want you to hold yourself up and not ever meet people. I get it - being careful - but also don't let your anxiety and what-ifs drive you away from ever experiencing friendships."

Scott

So what do you do if you don't go out with friends to clubs and stuff? Have you gotten other hobbies? How do you spend your time?

Sarah

I got into painting. I do a lot of DIY crafts, which has been very good for me. It's very therapeutic to take on something that I didn't have any experience with. It was more of a challenge for me to follow through with something that I was not good at because I have a default character to quit when I try something once and it doesn't turn out perfect. So, in challenging myself, I've actually become okay at painting. I'm not like Picasso, but it's been therapeutic. I still go to therapy every week. I'm going to support groups like NA, AA, Nar-Anon, spending time with my family, and spending a lot of time with my cat. I've found ways that are filling up my time, but I'm still learning how to be social or what that will look like and not being scared to try.

Scott

Yeah, you got to just ease into it. How did this whole experience affect your relationship with your dad?

Sarah

It allowed me to have a relationship with my dad that I would not have. I don't know if we would ever have had any sort of relationship if this didn't happen. Having an adult relationship with a parent is really awesome. Getting to know my dad over these past five years and him getting to know me and realizing that we're very much alike.

Bill

We've never been closer than we are right now. She's an incredible young woman. She impresses me every single day. I think that she is sorry for how things went between us, and believe me, I was no altar boy's terms of how our relationship went and how things went with her mother. I was an immature dad when we first had Sarah. I was young. There were a lot of things I wish I could do over in terms of that and things that I missed out on. But we've both looked at where we were and where we are today. I

think that I'm a sounding board for Sarah. She leans on me for advice and I'm constantly impressed with her.

Sarah

Having a father figure that I rely on and include in my life has set so many standards for me of, like, whenever I do choose to be in, like, a romantic relationship, my stepmom and my dad set an amazing example of what that is supposed to look like. Having my dad is really cool. I mean, it's not like I didn't have him before, but putting in the effort on my part and including him in my life has changed it all for the better and it makes everything that had to happen to get to this point worth it.

Scott

I can't help but think of the comparison of someone in the family dealing drugs, being heavily involved in that world, and a close family member being a drug enforcement agent. Have you guys ever watched Breaking Bad?

Sarah

We love Breaking Bad. We love it. I'm someone who watches it quite a few times. We were very excited to watch Better Call Saul together and just be involved in, like, the entire Breaking Bad Universe. Spoiler alert, if anyone's not watched it, every time when Hank dies, I'm like, "Turn it off. This is like seeing my dad— like, this is my dad."

Scott

Yeah, you're Walter White and he's Hank.

Sarah

Yeah. I'm glad that ours ended differently and we're both alive and better, but we love Breaking Bad and that's a fun aspect that we can tease each other about.

Scott

Sure. It's a connection. Did this experience affect his job or his career at all?

Sarah

No. Thankfully, the DEA was understanding of the situation and allowed my dad to deal with that privately. He has retired since then and has been working at a different non-government company now. So he is retired, but he likes working.

Scott

What's next for you? You're doing some public speaking. What do you have in mind going forward?

Sarah

I really enjoy when I do get to public speak and be involved in, like, teen academies and get to speak to our younger generation. I think I resonate with them best because I'm like, "I was you not that long ago. It doesn't matter - your socioeconomic status, where you were born, what your parents do for a job. Anybody can fall into addiction." There's this preconceived notion of like, "Oh well, if you were socioeconomically disadvantaged, that's who's going to fall into drugs." I'm like, "Drug addiction is not bound by race, time, or wealth. It can affect anybody, and don't think that it won't be you because it will." So I enjoy talking to teens and I do some parent talks also. I just try to talk to them about what my experience was and what I think could help someone else. Like, I know it was obviously not my parents'

fault or any of the choices that I made, but I can speak from a teenager's perspective and have a close relationship with your kids, not just asking them, "Hey, what'd you do for school?" I know that as a teenager, they're trying to find their sense of independence. I'm like, "While they might push you away, they really do want a close relationship with you. Keep pursuing them and get on their level. If your kid loves video games, grab a controller and ask them to play 2-player and just get on their level so that you can really get to know them and know what's going on because we build up walls as teens and we think we have it under control. But you definitely need that parent to just be there for you emotionally and it will make your kids want to come to ask you for help. "

Scott

If you'd like to see the full transcript of this episode, or if you want to see pictures of Sarah, including the booking photo that went viral, you can get all of that in the show notes at WhatWasThatLike.com/136.

Sarah mentioned doing some public speaking to parents and kids about her story, and her father Bill often goes with her to those events, and he told me he really enjoys that.

Bill

She and I have done those together. I sat there and listened to her speak, and I'll tell you this. The first time she did it, when I actually sat there, I watched her air her soul and become very vulnerable in front of a group of strangers. To say that it was impressive doesn't really do it justice. I think she really made a difference with some people.

Scott

And this voice mail came in recently -

Jessica

Hi there. My name is Jessica. I just want to call and say I'm loving the show. I just started listening to the podcast last week. It's been suggested a few times before through ad reads on other podcasts, and I finally added it to my podcast app and I'm hooked. Thank you for the work you put into the episode show notes. I love that you include guest info, pictures, videos, entire transcripts, and more on your website. It really helps connect this to the story. It's added content that we just don't get with other podcasts. I love that you allow the guests on the show to tell their story in their own way. I've never felt so impacted by the stories I've heard. I haven't been able to get some people and episodes out of my head since I started listening. Thank you.

Scott

And if you have a comment, you can record it on your phone and email to me, or you can call the podcast voice mail line anytime day or night, at 727-386-9468.

One of the things I get regularly in my email are people sending me their own story, wondering if it would be a good fit for a podcast episode. And usually I can tell right away if it would work or not. So if you have a story that you think might work, go to the website, WhatWasThatLike.com, and click on the form to send in your story. The more details you can provide, the better. I can't necessarily respond to every one of them, but I do read all of them.

But today I also wanted to let you know about some of the more specific stories I'm looking for. So just in case you may have personally experienced one of these things, or maybe you know someone who went through this – here are a few that I'd like to do.

I'd like to talk to a prison employee, who is or was in charge of executions.

I'd like to hear someone's story about inheriting an island or a castle from an unknown relative.

I'd also like to hear from someone who survived being a passenger in a train when it derailed – OR, being a passenger in a car when it was HIT by a train.

And then this one, which is really sad and we hear about this happening here in Florida – sometimes a parent will be driving somewhere with their baby or small child in the back seat of the car, and they'll get to their destination, or they'll arrive home and go inside – and forget the baby is in the car. So many times that happens, and the child doesn't survive because of the heat. So much to talk about with a story like that, and to hear it from the parent's perspective would be really intriguing.

So if any of those things have happened to you or someone you know, I'd love to hear about it.

Graphics for this episode were created by Bob Bretz. Full episode transcription was created by James Lai.

And now, we're at this week's Listener Story. Every episode ends with a story that's about 5-10 minutes long, and it's sent in by a listener about something interesting that happened to them.

This Listener Story is about a family nightmare.

Stay safe – and I'll see you in two weeks.

Sarah

In 2000, my boyfriend and I bought a house where we lived with our kids from previous marriages. Life was good at first, but within a year it had changed dramatically. He had become very manipulative and controlling. His daughter was a master manipulator as well and had become a handful. Still, I thought I could make this work. My boyfriend was an only child and came to the United States in 1970. I was very unhappy and was planning on moving out with my daughter.

When he was diagnosed with cancer, I felt obligated to stay and take care of his kids. In 2004, he went through a stem cell transplant and had to move in with his parents for a month. Upon arriving home, things got worse each day and he fought me daily on taking his medications. He was in and out of the hospital weekly. I was teaching full-time, taking care of the house and kids, and making the hour drive daily to the hospital and the evenings.

During one of the visits, his parents had brought in a lawyer who was a longtime family friend. He was there to do a living will. In the will, my daughter was to receive his SUV, which she drove to and from school. I was to get the house and only have to pay property taxes. In the event of his passing, I was willing to raise his kids even though we weren't married. Shortly after that visit, he passed away. The lawyer was there the day he passed. Within minutes of his passing, my boyfriend's parents asked that I take the kids and leave the room. The very day after he died, his parents told me that my daughter and I

had 48 hours to move out of the house. They had changed the will, which I don't think was legal in the ensuing days.

They went to my daughter's school where they took off the license plate so she could not drive it, and took them off my car as well, stating that their son had purchased the car and I had no right to it. My daughter moved into her best friend's house and I stayed in a motel for 10 days while looking for a place for us to live. My sister gave me her car to use until I could purchase one. They had changed the locks on the house and I ended up having to call the police and show ID so I could pack up as much of our belongings as possible under their supervision. His parents watched my every move. They also told me that at the time they took our husky to a shelter and would not tell me where. I went through a living hell for two years after he died because they totally turned my boyfriend's kids against me. They seem to take pleasure in leaving threatening hate messages on both my daughters and my phones.

I'm telling you this story because, for anyone that is listening who has gone through death or a traumatic experience, stay strong and take each day one at a time. Time does heal all wounds and life does get better. Thank you, Scott, for listening to my story.