

My Addicted Son

By DAVID SHEFF

Published: February 6, 2005

The New York Times

One windy day in May 2002, my young children, Jasper and Daisy, who were 8 and 5, spent the morning cutting, pasting and coloring notes and welcome banners for their brother's homecoming. They had not seen Nick, who was arriving from college for the summer, in six months. In the afternoon, we all drove to the airport to pick him up.

At home in Inverness, north of San Francisco, Nick, who was then 19, lugged his duffel bag and backpack into his old bedroom. He unpacked and emerged with his arms loaded with gifts. After dinner, he put the kids to bed, reading to them from "The Witches," by Roald Dahl. We heard his voice -- voices -- from the next room: the boy narrator, all wonder and earnestness; wry and creaky Grandma; and the shrieking, haggy Grand High Witch. The performance was irresistible, and the children were riveted. Nick was a playful and affectionate big brother to Jasper and Daisy -- when he wasn't robbing them.

Late that night, I heard the creaking of bending tree branches. I also heard Nick padding along the hallway, making tea in the kitchen, quietly strumming his guitar and playing Tom Waits, Bjork and Bollywood soundtracks. I worried about his insomnia, but pushed away my suspicions, instead reminding myself how far he had come since the previous school year, when he dropped out of Berkeley. This time, he had gone east to college and had made it through his freshman year. Given what we had been through, this felt miraculous. As far as we knew, he was coming up on his 150th day without methamphetamine.

In the morning, Nick, in flannel pajama bottoms and a fraying woolen sweater, shuffled into the kitchen. His skin was rice-papery and gaunt, and his hair was like a field, with smashed-down sienna patches and sticking-up yellowed clumps, a disaster left over from when he tried to bleach it. Lacking the funds for Lady Clairol, his brilliant idea was to soak his head in a bowl of Clorox.

Nick hovered over the kitchen counter, fussing with the stove-top espresso maker, filling it with water and coffee and setting it on a flame, and then sat down to a bowl of cereal with Jasper and Daisy. I stared hard at him. The giveaway was his body, vibrating like an idling car. His jaw gyrated and his eyes were darting opals. He made plans with the kids for after school and gave them hugs. When they were gone, I said, "I know you're using again."

He glared at me: "What are you talking about? I'm not." His eyes fixed onto the floor.

"Then you won't mind being drug-tested."

"Whatever."

When Nick next emerged from his bedroom, head down, his backpack was slung over his back, and he held his electric guitar by the neck. He left the house, slamming the door behind him. Late that afternoon,

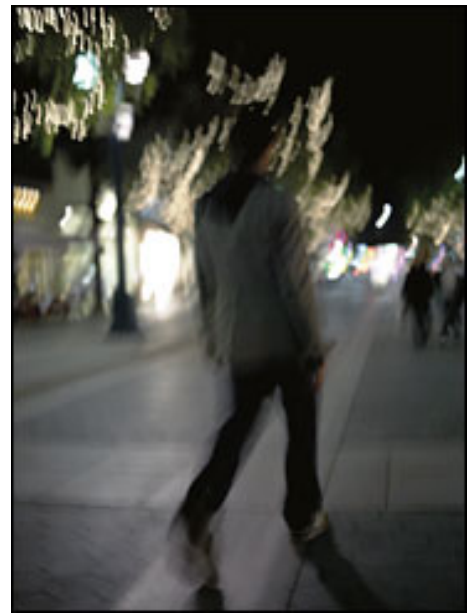


Figure 1. Nick Sheff in Santa Monica. His father is hopeful, again, that this time the sobriety lasts.

Jasper and Daisy burst in, dashing from room to room, before finally stopping and, looking up at me, asking, "Where's Nick?"

Nick now claims that he was searching for methamphetamine for his entire life, and when he tried it for the first time, as he says, "That was that." It would have been no easier to see him strung out on heroin or cocaine, but as every parent of a methamphetamine addict comes to learn, this drug has a unique, horrific quality. In an interview, Stephan Jenkins, the singer in the band Third Eye Blind, said that methamphetamine makes you feel "bright and shiny." It also makes you paranoid, incoherent and both destructive and pathetically and relentlessly self-destructive. Then you will do unconscionable things in order to feel bright and shiny again. Nick had always been a sensitive, sagacious, joyful and exceptionally bright child, but on meth he became unrecognizable.

Nick's mother and I were attentive, probably overly attentive -- part of the first wave of parents obsessed with our children in a self-conscious way. (Before us, people had kids. We parented.) Nick spent his first years on walks in his stroller and Snugli, playing in Berkeley parks and baby gyms and visiting zoos and aquariums.

His mother and I divorced when he was 4. No child benefits from the bitterness and savagery of a divorce like ours. Like fallout from a dirty bomb, the collateral damage is widespread and enduring. Nick was hit hard. The effects lingered well after his mother and I settled on a joint-custody arrangement and, later, after we both remarried.

As a kindergartner, when he wore tights, the other school children teased him: "Only girls wear tights." Nick responded: "Uh, uh, Superman wears tights." I was proud of his self-assuredness and individuality. Nick readily rebelled against conventional habit, mores and taste. Still, he could be susceptible to peer pressure. During the brief celebrity of Kris Kross, he wore backward clothes. At 11, he was hidden inside grungy flannel, shuffling around in Doc Martens. Hennaed bangs hung Cobain-like over his eyes.

Throughout his youth, I talked to Nick "early and often" about drugs in ways now prescribed by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America. I watched for one organization's early warning signs of teenage alcoholism and drug abuse. (No. 15: "Does your child volunteer to clean up after adult cocktail parties, but neglect other chores?") Indeed, when he was 12, I discovered a vial of marijuana in his backpack. I met with his teacher, who said: "It's normal. Most kids try it." Nick said that it was a mistake -- he had been influenced by a couple of thuggish boys at his new school -- and he promised that he would not use it again.

In his early teens, Nick was into the hippest music and then grew bored with it. By the time his favorite artists, from Guns N' Roses to Beck to Eminem, had a hit record, Nick had discarded them in favor of the retro, the obscure, the ultra contemporary or plain bizarre, an eclectic list that included Coltrane, polka, the soundtrack from "The Umbrellas of Cherbourg" and, for a memorable period, samba, to which he would cha-cha through the living room. His heroes, including Holden Caulfield and Atticus Finch, were replaced by an assortment of misanthropes, addicts, drunks, depressives and suicides, role models like Burroughs, Bukowski, Cobain, Hemingway and Basquiat. Other children watched Disney and "Star Wars," but Nick preferred Scorsese, David Lynch and Godard.

At 14, when he was suspended from high school for a day for buying pot on campus, Nick and my wife and I met with the freshman dean. "We view this as a mistake and an opportunity," he explained. Nick was forced to undergo a day at a drug-and-alcohol program but was given a second chance. A teacher took Nick under his wing, encouraging his interest in marine biology. He surfed with him and persuaded him to join the swimming and water-polo teams. Nick had two productive and, as far as I know, drug-free

years. He showed promise as a student actor, artist and writer. For a series of columns in the school newspaper, he won the Ernest Hemingway Writing Award for high-school journalists, and he published a column in Newsweek.

After his junior year, Nick attended a summer program in French at the American University of Paris. I now know that he spent most of his time emulating some of his drunken heroes, though he forgot the writing and painting part. His souvenir of his Parisian summer was an ulcer. What child has an ulcer at 16? Back at high school for his senior year, he was still an honor student, with a nearly perfect grade-point average. Even as he applied to and was accepted at a long list of colleges, one senior-class dean told me, half in jest, that Nick set a school record for tardiness and cutting classes. My wife and I consulted a therapist, and a school counselor reassured us: "You're describing an adolescent. Nick's candor, unusual especially in boys, is a good sign. Keep talking it out with him, and he'll get through this."

His high-school graduation ceremony was held outdoors on the athletic field. With his hair freshly buzzed, Nick marched forward and accepted his diploma from the school head, kissing her cheek. He seemed elated. Maybe everything would be all right after all. Afterward, we invited his friends over for a barbecue. Later we learned that a boy in jeans and a sport coat had scored some celebratory sensimilla. Nick and his friends left our house for a grad-night bash that was held at a local recreation center, where he tried ecstasy for the first time.

A few weeks later, my wife planned to take the kids to the beach. The fog had lifted, and I was with them in the driveway, helping to pack the car. Two county sheriff's patrol cars pulled up. When a pair of uniformed officers approached, I thought they needed directions, but they walked past me and headed for Nick. They handcuffed his wrists behind his back, pushed him into the back seat of one of the squad cars and drove away. Jasper, then 7, was the only one of us who responded appropriately. He wailed, inconsolable for an hour. The arrest was a result of Nick's failure to appear in court after being cited for marijuana possession, an infraction he "forgot" to tell me about. Still, I bailed him out, confident that the arrest would teach him a lesson. Any fear or remorse he felt was short-lived, however, blotted out by a new drug -- crystal methamphetamine.

When I was a child, my parents implored me to stay away from drugs. I dismissed them, because they didn't know what they were talking about. They were -- still are -- teetotalers. I, on the other hand, knew about drugs, including methamphetamine. On a Berkeley evening in the early 1970's, my college roommate arrived home, yanked the thrift-shop mirror off the wall and set it upon a coffee table. He unfolded an origami packet and poured out its contents onto the mirror: a mound of crystalline powder. From his wallet he produced a single-edge razor, with which he chipped at the crystals, the steel tapping rhythmically on the glass. While arranging the powder in four parallel rails, he explained that Michael the Mechanic, our drug dealer, had been out of cocaine. In its place, he purchased crystal methamphetamine.

I snorted the lines through a rolled-up dollar bill. The chemical burned my nasal passages, and my eyes watered. Whether the drug is sniffed, smoked, swallowed or injected, the body quickly absorbs methamphetamine. Once it reaches the circulatory system, it's a near-instant flume ride to the central nervous system. When it reached mine, I heard cacophonous music like a calliope and felt as if Roman candles had been lighted inside my skull. Methamphetamine triggers the brain's neurotransmitters, particularly dopamine, which spray like bullets from a gangster's tommy gun. The drug destroys the receptors and as a result may, over time, permanently reduce dopamine levels, sometimes leading to symptoms normally associated with Parkinson's disease like tremors and muscle twitches. Meth increases the heart rate and blood pressure and can cause irreversible damage to blood vessels in the brain, which can lead to strokes. It can also cause arrhythmia and cardiovascular collapse, possibly leading to death. But I felt fantastic -- supremely confident, euphoric.

After methamphetamine triggers the release of neurotransmitters, it blocks their reuptake back into their storage pouches, much as cocaine and other stimulants do. Unlike cocaine, however, meth also blocks the enzymes that help to break down invasive drugs, so the released chemicals float freely until they wear off. Methamphetamine remains active for 10 to 12 hours, compared with 45 minutes for cocaine. When the dawn began to seep through the cracked window blinds, I felt bleak, depleted and agitated. I went to bed and eventually slept for a full day, blowing off school.

I never touched methamphetamine again, but my roommate returned again and again to Michael the Mechanic's, and his meth run lasted for two weeks. Not long afterward, he moved away, and I lost touch with him. I later learned that after college, his life was defined by his drug abuse. There were voluntary and court-ordered rehabs, car crashes, a house that went up in flames when he fell asleep with a burning cigarette in his mouth, ambulance rides to emergency rooms after overdoses and accidents and incarcerations, both in hospitals and jails. He died on the eve of his 40th birthday.

When I told Nick cautionary stories like this and warned him about crystal, I thought that I might have some credibility. I have heard drug counselors tell parents of my generation to lie to our children about our past drug use. Famous athletes show up at school assemblies or on television and tell kids, "Man, don't do this stuff, I almost died," and yet there they stand, diamonds, gold, multimillion-dollar salaries and fame. The words: I barely survived. The message: I survived, thrived and you can, too. Kids see that their parents turned out all right in spite of the drugs. So maybe I should have lied, and maybe I'll try lying to Daisy and Jasper. Nick, however, knew the truth. I don't know how much it mattered. Part of me feels solely responsible -- if only his mother and I had stayed together; if only she and I had lived in the same city after the divorce and had a joint-custody arrangement that was easier on him; if only I had set stricter limits; if only I had been more consistent. And yet I also sense that Nick's course was determined by his first puff of pot and sip of wine and sealed with the first hit of speed the summer before he began college.

When Nick's therapist said that college would straighten him out, I wanted to believe him. When change takes place gradually, it's difficult to comprehend its meaning. At what point is a child no longer experimenting, no longer a typical teenager, no longer going through a phase or a rite of passage? I am astounded -- no, appalled -- by my ability to deceive myself into believing that everything would turn out all right in spite of mounting evidence to the contrary.

At the University of California at Berkeley, Nick almost immediately began dealing to pay for his escalating meth habit. After three months, he dropped out, claiming that he had to pull himself together. I encouraged him to check into a drug-rehabilitation facility, but he refused. (He was over 18, and I could not commit him.) He disappeared. When he finally called after a week, his voice trembled. It nonetheless brought a wave of relief -- he was alive. I drove to meet him in a weedy and garbage-strewn alleyway in San Rafael. My son, the svelte and muscular swimmer, water-polo player and surfer with an ebullient smile, was bruised, sallow, skin and bone, and his eyes were vacant black holes. Ill and rambling, he spent the next three days curled up in bed.

I was bombarded with advice, much of it contradictory. I was advised to kick him out. I was advised not to let him out of my sight. One counselor warned, "Don't come down too hard on him or his drug use will just go underground." One mother recommended a lockup school in Mexico, where she sent her daughter to live for two years. A police officer told me that I should send Nick to a boot camp where children, roused and shackled in the middle of the night, are taken by force.

His mother and I decided that we had to do everything possible to get Nick into a drug-rehabilitation program, so we researched them, calling recommended facilities, inquiring about their success rates for

treating meth addicts. These conversations provided my initial glimpse of what must be the most chaotic, flailing field of health care in America. I was quoted success rates in a range from 20 to 85 percent. An admitting nurse at a Northern California hospital insisted: "The true number for meth addicts is in the single digits. Anyone who promises more is lying." But what else could we try? I used what was left of my waning influence -- the threat of kicking him out of the house and withdrawing all of my financial support -- to get him to commit himself into the Ohlhoff Recovery Program in San Francisco. It is a well-respected program, recommended by many of the experts in the Bay Area. A friend of a friend told me that the program turned around the life of her heroin-addicted son.

Nick trembled when I dropped him off. Driving home afterward, I felt as if I would collapse from more emotion than I could handle. Incongruously, I felt as if I had betrayed him, though I did take some small consolation in the fact that I knew where he was; for the first time in a while, I slept through the night.

For their initial week, patients were forbidden to use the telephone, but Nick managed to call, begging to come home. When I refused, he slammed down the receiver. His counselor reported that he was surly, depressed and belligerent, threatening to run away. But he made it through the first week, which consisted of morning walks, lectures, individual and group sessions with counselors, 12-step-program meetings and meditation and acupuncture. Family groups were added in the second week. My wife and I, other visiting parents and spouses or partners, along with our addicts, sat in worn couches and folding chairs, and a grandmotherly, whiskey-voiced (though sober for 20 years) counselor led us in conversation.

"Tell your parents what it means that they're here with you, Nick," she said.

"Whatever. It's fine."

By the fourth and final week, he seemed open and apologetic, claiming to be determined to take responsibility for the mess he'd made of his life. He said that he knew that he needed more time in treatment, and so we agreed to his request to move into the transitional residential program. He did, and then three days later he bolted. At some point, parents may become inured to a child's self-destruction, but I never did. I called the police and hospital emergency rooms. I didn't hear anything for a week. When he finally called, I told him that he had two choices as far as I was concerned: another try at rehab or the streets. He maintained that it was unnecessary -- he would stop on his own -- but I told him that it wasn't negotiable. He listlessly agreed to try again.

I called another recommended program, this one at the St. Helena Hospital Center for Behavioral Health, improbably located in the Napa Valley wine country. Many families drain every penny, mortgaging their homes and bankrupting their college funds and retirement accounts, trying successive drug-rehab programs. My insurance and his mother's paid most of the costs of these programs. Without this coverage, I'm not sure what we would have done. By then I was no longer sanguine about rehabilitation, but in spite of our experience and the questionable success rates, there seemed to be nothing more effective for meth addiction.

Patients in the St. Helena program keep journals. In Nick's, he wrote one day: "How the hell did I get here? It doesn't seem that long ago that I was on the water-polo team. I was an editor of the school newspaper, acting in the spring play, obsessing about which girls I liked, talking Marx and Dostoevsky with my classmates. The kids in my class will be starting their junior years of college. This isn't so much sad as baffling. It all seemed so positive and harmless, until it wasn't."

By the time he completed the fourth week, Nick once again seemed determined to stay away from drugs. He applied to a number of small liberal-arts schools on the East Coast. His transcripts were still good

enough for him to be accepted at the colleges to which he applied, and he selected Hampshire, located in a former apple orchard in Western Massachusetts.

In August, my wife and I flew east with him for freshman orientation. At the welcoming picnic, Karen and I surveyed the incoming freshmen for potential drug dealers. We probably would have seen this on most campuses, but we were not reassured when we noticed a number of students wearing T-shirts decorated with marijuana leaves, portraits of Bob Marley smoking a spliff and logos for the Church of LSD.

In spite of his protestations and maybe (though I'm not sure) his good intentions and in spite of his room in substance-free housing, Nick didn't stand a chance. He tried for a few weeks. When he stopped returning my phone calls, I assumed that he had relapsed. I asked a friend, who was visiting Amherst, to stop by to check on him. He found Nick holed up in his room. He was obviously high. I later learned that not only had Nick relapsed, but he had supplemented methamphetamine with heroin and morphine, because, he explained, at the time meth was scarce in Western Massachusetts. "Everyone told me not to try it, you know?" Nick later said about heroin. "They were like, 'Whatever you do, stay away from dope.' I wish I'd got the same warning about meth. By the time I got around to doing heroin, I really didn't see what the big deal was."

I prepared to follow through on my threat and stop paying his tuition unless he returned to rehab, but I called a health counselor, who advised patience, saying that often "relapse is part of recovery." A few days later, Nick called and told me that he would stop using. He went to 12-step program meetings and, he claimed, suffered the detox and early meth withdrawal that is characterized by insuperable depression and acute anxiety -- a drawn-out agony. He kept in close touch and got through the year, doing well in some writing and history classes, newly in love with a girl who drove him to Narcotics Anonymous meetings and eager to see Jasper and Daisy. His homecoming was marked by trepidation, but also promise, which is why it was so devastating when we discovered the truth.

When Nick left, I sunk into a wretched and sickeningly familiar malaise, alternating with a debilitating panic. One morning, Jasper came into the kitchen, holding a satin box, a gift from a friend upon his return from China, in which he kept his savings of \$8. Jasper looked perplexed. "I think Nick took my money," he said. How do you explain to an 8-year-old why his beloved big brother steals from him?

After a week, I succumbed to my desperation and went to try to find him. I drove over the Golden Gate Bridge from Marin County to San Francisco, to the Haight, where I knew he often hung out. The neighborhood, in spite of some gentrification, retains its 1960's-era funkiness. Kids -- tattooed, pierced, track-marked, stoned -- loiter in doorways. Of course I didn't find him.

After another few weeks, he called, collect: "Hey, Pop, it's me." I asked if he would meet me. No matter how unrealistic, I retained a sliver of hope that I could get through to him. That's not quite accurate. I knew I couldn't, but at least I could put my fingertips on his cheek.

For our meeting, Nick chose Steps of Rome, a cafe on Columbus Avenue in North Beach, our neighborhood after his mother and I divorced. In those days, Nick played in Washington Square Park opposite the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul, down the hill from our Russian Hill flat. We would eat early dinner at Vanessi's, an Italian restaurant now gone. The waiters, when they saw Nick, then towheaded, with a gap between his front teeth, would lift him up and set him on telephone books stacked on a stool at the counter. Nick was little enough so that after dinner, when he got sleepy, I could carry him home, his tiny arms wrapped around my neck.

Since reason and love, the forces I had come to rely on, had betrayed me, I was in uncharted territory as I sat at a corner table nervously waiting for him. Steps of Rome was deserted, other than a couple of waiters folding napkins at the bar. I ordered coffee, racking my brain for the one thing I could say that I hadn't thought of that could get through to him. Drug-and-alcohol counselors, most of them former addicts, tell fathers like me it's not our fault. They preach "the Three C's": "You didn't cause it, you can't control it, and you can't cure it." But who among us doesn't believe that we could have done something differently that would have helped? "It hurts so bad to think I cannot save him, protect him, keep him out of harm's way, shield him from pain," wrote Thomas Lynch, the undertaker, poet and essayist, about his son, a drug addict and an alcoholic. "What good are fathers if not for these things?" I waited until it was more than half an hour past our meeting time, recognizing the mounting, suffocating worry and also the bitterness and anger. I had been waiting for Nick for years. At night, past his curfew, I waited for the car's grinding engine when it pulled into the driveway and went silent, the slamming door, footsteps and the front door opening with a click, despite his attempt at stealth. Our dog would yelp a halfhearted bark. When Nick was late, I always assumed catastrophe.

After 45 minutes waiting at Steps of Rome, I decided that he wasn't coming -- what had I expected? -- and left the cafe. Still, I walked around the block, returned again, peered into the cafe and then trudged around the block again. Another half-hour later, I was ready to go home, really, maybe, when I saw him. Walking down the street, looking down, his gangly arms limp at his sides, he looked more than ever like a ghostly, hollow Egon Schiele self-portrait, debauched and emaciated. I returned his hug, my arms wrapping around his vaporous spine, and kissed his cheek. We embraced like that and sat down at a table by the window. He couldn't look me in the eye. No apologies for being late. He asked how I was, how were the little kids? He folded and unfolded a soda straw and rocked anxiously in his chair; his fingers trembled, and he clenched his jaw and ground his teeth. He pre-empted any questions, saying: "I'm doing. Great. I'm doing what I need to be doing, being responsible for myself for the first time in my life." I asked if he was ready to kick, to return to the living, to which he said, "Don't start." When I said that Jasper and Daisy missed him, he cut me off. "I can't deal with that. Don't guilt-trip me." Nick drank down his coffee, held onto his stomach. I watched him rise and leave.

Through Nick's drug addiction, I learned that parents can bear almost anything. Every time we reach a point where we feel as if we can't bear any more, we do. Things had descended in a way that I never could have imagined, and I shocked myself with my ability to rationalize and tolerate things that were once unthinkable. He's just experimenting. Going through a stage. It's only marijuana. He gets high only on weekends. At least he's not using heroin. He would never resort to needles. At least he's alive.

A fortnight later, Nick wrote an e-mail message to his mother and asked for help. After they talked, he agreed to meet with a friend of our family who took him to her home in upstate New York, where he could detox. He slept for 20 or more hours a day for a week and began to work with a therapist who specialized in drug addiction. After six or so weeks, he seemed stronger and somewhat less desolate. His mother helped him move into an apartment in Brooklyn, and he got a job. When he finally called, he told me that he would never again use methamphetamine, though he made no such vows about marijuana and alcohol. With this news, I braced myself for the next disaster. A new U.C.L.A. study confirms that I had reason to expect one: recovering meth addicts who stay off alcohol and marijuana are significantly less likely to relapse.

Two or so months later, the phone rang at 5 on a Sunday morning. Every parent of a drug-addicted child recoils at a ringing telephone at that hour. I was informed that Nick was in a hospital emergency room in Brooklyn after an overdose. He was in critical condition and on life support.

After two hours, the doctor called to tell me that his vital signs had leveled off. Still later, he called to say that Nick was no longer on the critical list. From his hospital bed, when he was coherent enough to talk, Nick sounded desperate. He asked to go into another program, said it was his only chance.

So without reluctance this time, Nick returned to rehab. After six or so months, he moved to Santa Monica near his mother. He lived in a sober-living home, attended meetings regularly and began working with a sponsor. He had several jobs, including one at a drug-and-alcohol rehabilitation program in Malibu. Last April, after celebrating his second year sober, he relapsed again, disappearing for two weeks. His sponsor, who had become a close friend of Nick's, assured me: "Nick won't stay out long. He's not having any fun." Of course I hoped that he was right, but I was no less worried than I was other times he had disappeared - worried that he could overdose or otherwise cause irreparable damage.

But he didn't. He returned and withdrew on his own, helped by his sponsor and other friends. He was ashamed -- mortified -- that he slipped. He redoubled his efforts. Ten months later, of course, I am relieved (once again) and hopeful (once again). Nick is working and writing a children's book and articles and movie reviews for an online magazine. He is biking and swimming. He seems emphatically committed to his sobriety, but I have learned to check my optimism.

We recently visited Nick. His eyes were clear, his body strong and his laugh easy and honest. At night, he read to Jasper and Daisy, picking up "The Witches" where he left off nearly three years before. Soon thereafter, a letter arrived for Jasper, who is now 11. Nick wrote: "I'm looking for a way to say I'm sorry more than with just the meaninglessness of those two words. I also know that this money can never replace all that I stole from you in terms of the fear and worry and craziness that I brought to your young life. The truth is, I don't know how to say I'm sorry. I love you, but that has never changed. I care about you, but I always have. I'm proud of you, but none of that makes it any better. I guess what I can offer you is this: As you're growing up, whenever you need me -- to talk or just whatever -- I'll be able to be there for you now. That is something that I could never promise you before. I will be here for you. I will live, and build a life, and be someone that you can depend on. I hope that means more than this stupid note and these eight dollar bills."

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