

Overcome the Podcast - Episode 9
By Christian Bowman

Backtracking to my time at the University of Texas at Austin, just after getting Jenny's first communication, I had begun a toxic relationship with someone who drank just as much as I was. I was still bartending while attending college in addition to starting my own company. Every weekend, I was back in the party trying to fund it all. While I was in school throughout the week, getting some of the most amazing education available from incredible professors like producer/director Scott Rice and Mathew McConaughey, learning from photography from Eli Reed, Mathew Sturtevant and Dennis Darling, Going on deep script theory analysis with Lalitha Gopalan, studying film history with Charles Ramirez-Berg, working screenplay structure with Cindy McCreery, and exploring the art and science of 3D with global media head Buzz Hays. The weekend would come, and I would go in and watch people begin the night with thoughtful conversation, then a few rounds of shots later, would have to jump the bar to break up belligerent fights at 2am. The toll was taxing my body.

I had started a media production company called Last Pull Productions. The Last Pull was an homage to my uncle. There was this thing back in the skydiving days. Whoever was the first to pull their parachute had to buy drinks, the last to pull always enjoyed the best of the night. I thought it was also a nice double entendre to focus pulling a camera lens. I had worked with a bunch of other production companies in Austin and pieced together a gear package that would be capable of shooting an independent film. I reinvested everything I earned into more gear and grew the

company. I began putting my advertising background to work and slid into digital media marketing. Content producing was not as satisfying as narrative work, but it was paying the bills. Almost. There was still this really difficult easy money job that was hard to shake. I was a great bartender and worked the best bars. I was fast and make tons of cash in a short amount of time. But, the lifestyle was still dangerous. Having a shot of whiskey with someone was the equivalent of a handshake. By the end of the night, you have more than half a bottle of scotch in your belly. Then, when you go out, especially in Austin where the nightlife dominates the city and there are entertainment districts everywhere you turn with literally hundreds of bars packed next to each other, Everywhere... you go and say hi to friends and have a shot and a beer as a hello. To each one. Typically bouncing to ten to fifteen bars a night visiting everyone. I rarely went out with the intention to get drunk, but just being there, with the people I was hanging out with, going to grab a bite and head out for drinks is all we did at night. But then, it got earlier and earlier. Whiskey was no longer was regulated to the night.

When I graduated, with honors, I was so proud to have this academic association. The school track was really good for me. I loved having deadlines and being presented with challenges. It was a huge accomplishment for me. I felt more prepared and had wished I had the opportunity to make the movie after learning how to actually do it, although, I remain ever grateful to Ryan and Leticia for learning the hard way before being able to understand the lessons in school. One of the ways most Austin bartenders get out of the bars is by becoming a Real Estate agent. A few friends had become millionaires from it and they convinced me to get my license and come in. So I did. I

leverages social skills from the bar and used the money I was making from real estate to finance the media production company, that was doing ok, but not well enough to grow the way I wanted it to. But I still hadn't let the bartending go. Real Estate was just another way to make more money and now I had three streams of income. Things were going great. Then, around six months after graduating, I began to get sick. The weather was turning in November and I had taken a flu shot, but it was too late, I had already contracted the virus. The influenza got bad, really bad. Things became really complicated when it jumped to pneumonia. I tried to take cough syrup for it, but it didn't do much more than give me hallucinations that I was sinking deep into the ground with each cough. A month of the symptoms and I got worse and worse.

I didn't have health insurance at the time as everything I was doing was freelance self employment. My son had come out to visit me for Christmas. I felt bad that I couldn't physically do much with him. The girl I was dating had left to go to Alaska with her family and Bodhi was keeping himself occupied by learning magic. He had become quite the accomplished magician by then. We went to my younger brothers house for Christmas dinner and I didn't feel very well. So we only stayed for a little while. He said, my ankles were swollen... along with the rest of my body. It's not just a cough. I needed to go to the hospital. I told him I would go the next day. After trying to get an antibiotic at the minute clinic in the pharmacy the next morning, the nurse on staff told me "Honey, you need to go to the ER right now, you might need to wait in the waiting room, but you need to go now." I figured everyone was right, even though I fought it thinking I would get better. I drove home and grabbed Bodhi and my laptop if we were

going to be in the waiting room for awhile. Then, drove over to the University of Texas Dell Seton hospital. I could barely walk to the ER doors from the car without stopping to catch my breath. When I walked in to check in, I signed my name and they took my pulse. When they saw my heart rate 220 over 160, they sprung into action. I barely had time to tell my son anything. Before I knew it, I was on a gurney being rushed to the back.

Four hours later, I was dead.

My name is Christian Bowman, and this is Overcome.

I was glad my son didn't actually see me. I don't really remember much about it. I remember moaning and turning left and right and getting colder. Then blackness.

Nothingness.

No light. No out of body experience. Just dark emptiness.

Maybe I wasn't dead long enough.

When I came to, I was in the ICU surrounded by about a dozen doctors and nurses, all relieved and equally concerned. I was so embarrassed. When I died, my body relieved it's bowels. There was a beautiful nurse, Melissa, who was like an angel to

me. And I had shit myself in front of her. I was mortified. But she, and the whole staff at the University Dell Seton Hospital were incredible. They saved my life. My cardiologist, Dr. George Rogers really went above and beyond. He was instrumental in everything that followed.

When I developed pneumonia, my body was so weakened from the chronic alcoholism working in the bars that it gave out. My heart was three times too large, and not in a good way. A normal healthy heart is approximately the size of a fist. Mine was enlarged and not working properly. In addition, I had developed an irregular heart rate called Atrial Fibrillation. In essence, I had a short circuit in one of the chambers of my heart and it wasn't squeezing properly like the rest of the muscle. Instead, it sort of fluttered and would race my heartbeat up.

This reduced my ability to pump oxygen through my body adequately as the pump itself, or Ejection fraction, was barely operational. A normal heart has an ejection fraction of 60-70%. I was at 12%.

I had developed Congestive Heart Failure.

Speaking with another doctor, the combination of CHF, Congestive Heart Failure, coupled with Atrial Fibrillation and an extremely low Ejection Fraction was a recipe for disaster. Although they had brought me back to life, this other doctor let me know I had a little less than five years to live.

If I didn't have an existential crisis before then, I'll tell you what... being told you have less than five years left to live lights a fire under your ass.

But just like I had been told I might never walk again when I was 17, I refused to let that thought seed in my mind. No way was I going to let this happen. The first thing I needed to do was get sober. The first few days, while I was in the ICU, they had been watching to see if I went into toxic shock from sudden withdrawal. My physiological addiction had my body operating with, at minimum- half a bottle of whiskey and a six pack a day... for years. Just from regular bartending. That wasn't even the nights when I would actually go out with friends to have fun. I worked through it while my body fought to regain strength. Quitting drinking and adjusting my diet to reduce salt and eat healthy was the key to not retaining water, which would make my heart have to work harder than it needed to during recovery.

I had a few options ahead. One was that they go in with a lazer and burn away the parts of my heart that were short circuited, causing the AFib flutter. Another was to have an internal defibrillator surgically affixed to my heart, essentially sending out an AED shock to try to regulate my heart rate if I fell into arrhythmia. A third was to ride it out and put my name on the list for a heart transplant and hope I had a match happen before my ticker timed out.

After months of rehabilitation, MRI's and doctor visits multiple times per week, my veins were tapped out from the constant needles. I had discovered Rock Climbing as a sport that I really enjoyed prior to dying and I contribute a lot of my physical success afterward to an amazing gym in Austin called Crux. The owner and staff at Crux were instrumental in keeping me active. Along with the girl I was dating at the time. The doctors were a little concerned about me falling, however. I was on fourteen different medicines, that were going to cost over \$2500 per month to maintain. And several of them were blood thinners so that my AFib wouldn't pool blood up and clot. A big worry was that several blood cells would clot up and work their way through my arterial system, eventually finding its way up into my brain and lodging in a section, causing a stroke. The fear of just talking to someone one moment and having a stroke out of the blue another is a frightening concept. But the blood thinners could have shaken my brain around in my cranium in a fall and bruised it. So the doctors limited me to just top rope climbing where I would be more protected in a fall and not bouldering.

The more I thought about waiting for a heart transplant and thinking of others who might need it more than me, the less I wanted to pursue that option. Which just left the lasers or the defibrillator. I began reading more about the defibrillator and the stories seemed to be that when it does shock you, it feels like a horse kicking you in the chest. From the inside. It would limit everything. I wouldn't be able to ride a motorcycle, go climbing or much of anything else. It would introduce a constant fear of shock and it would have to be replaced every seven years or so, introducing lots of

medical expenses later. And with the atrial fibrillation fluttering my heart, I could be sure the defibrillator would shock me.

So I started pushing for the lasers, formally known as a catheter ablation. A few other cardiologists pushed forward with the plan, but first we needed to do something to get me out of AFib. The plan was to do something called Electrical Cardioversion, basically, the shock treatment once, but not implanted. I had read about this too and had built myself up for going in. Mentally prepping yourself for shock therapy seems like a silly thing after going skydiving and doing all the death defying things I had done before. But I was scared of it. I went in and the first thing they did was supply me with a medical induction to prep for the shock. Interestingly enough, the medical induction was enough to bring me out of AFib. The doctor acknowledged that realistically, it was getting sober that had done the trick for me and he was proud.

Things began moving forward with the ablation and I was ready to have frickin laser beams go in and burn away the broken parts of my heart. The doctor prepared me and the procedure lasted several hours. He showed me a photograph of it afterward that was blue and purple. He noted all the parts that he had to go in and burn. But he felt like he got it all. My heart had regained a significant increase in the ejection fraction and was now pumping close to normal standards.

He let me know that I still had CHF. Although I no longer had AFib or the Low EF, I still had heart disease. And that everything could easily slip right back if I continue the lifestyle I was living before. I needed to stay sober to stay alive.

When I returned to see Dr. Rogers, I was able to work my way off almost all the medications and he let me know I was his star patient. It made me happy. And he let me know the same thing, it was all contingent on staying healthy and active, but, accidents aside, I should have a strong heart to keep going.

During that time, the girl I had been dating applied to go to Graduate School and the same idea had worked its way back into my mind. I thought about it while I was at UT, but dying right after I graduated sort of put everything on the back burner while I really reassessed my life. I had applied at a couple of colleges, but really there was only one I wanted to go to: USC. I knew it had the strongest film production alumni of any college in the world and so I applied.

I didn't hear anything from them for a long time and in the meantime, the girl I was with moved away. I had quit drinking and was only working as a realtor and with the production company, so I was no longer in the bar world. My priorities had changed and I was working on things that mattered to me. One of my former professors, Scott Rice, and I had become good friends. He was the professor who worked with actor Mathew McConaughey on the Script to Screen advanced producing class. He had brought me on for a few projects that were philanthropic in nature. A PBS show about

science for kids, among other things, but the stand out volunteer project was working with Mathew McConaughey and the State of Texas for a human trafficking awareness campaign.

The clock was ticking and still I hadn't heard from USC. I did see other people who had applied at the same time either get in or get rejected, but still no word.

Finally, I talked to someone in admissions and they let me know that everyone who had been accepted was in and everyone who had been rejected were out but that there were just a few people that were going to be considered for a wait list and my name was on that list.

I figured, if I got it, I would need to be in LA anyway, so I began shutting everything down in Austin. I sold off most of the gear, let the pretty little cottage house I had go, sold my motorcycle and all the things except for what I could pack up in a U-Haul and got ready to hit the road.

I had been in Austin for over a decade. I had experienced so many things there and met so many amazing people. It was really the people that made it everything for me. I got to say goodbye to my friends in the bars, got to thank my friends in the local film industry, the rock climbers and the doctors. Got to say thank you to Dr. Rogers. Sent cookies to the nurses at the ICU in the hospital. Got to spend time with my brother Matt and his beautiful family. Then I hit the road, heading west.

My best friend had moved to El Paso and had opened up several bars there. I got to see him and all the work he had done on his places. Then I continued on. I had found a place online in LA and everything seemed legit from the website to the phone number for the apartment. I sent out my deposit and first months in advance to secure it. Then the property management website shut down, the phone number was disconnected and my money was gone. I scrambled to find a place last minute to land with the U-Haul in LA. I found a spot in Burbank through a realtor friend who made sure it was the real thing after just being scammed out of a bunch of money. I was glad to have made it, but now I really needed the USC student financial aid to kick in to be able to get by.

My youngest brother was now living in San Diego and he drove up to help me move in. It was an above garage apartment in the back of a house in Burbank at the extreme end of what I had budgeted myself to pay as a student. But it was something. I had gotten all settled in and began learning LA again. It had been over a decade and some things had changed, but LA will always be LA.

The vibrance of the city had a different energy from Austin. While Austin is warm and welcoming and people all say hello and howdy and breakfast tacos are life, LA is all about the hustle. Everyone there has a side hustle for money and a side hustle for art. They're all there to make it in some sort of industry and they are about to tell you all about it.

And it's fascinating! When you watch a movie and there are ten minutes of credits rolling after the film, all those people are on that hustle.

The film industry there is split three ways. There is the non union underground stuff, the porn industry generating billions and then the unionized film industry. To most who arrive, it's like a giant glass wall. You see the film trucks and the productions happening. You see the gates to the big production lots, but you don't have the pass. You see the talent agency offices, but don't have a solicited invitation. You watch it all and you want so badly to break in but you don't know how. And for some, once you are in, you see all the other people moving there to try to come and muscle in to take your spot so you work hard to maintain the wall and keep them out. It's a unique machine.

I figured my way in was going to be through USC, and I loved walking the campus, swinging by the Cinematic Arts buildings.

After waiting and prepping and moving and having everything ready, I received the news. Just as I had done all my research on prepping for graduate school and had everything lined up, the admissions scandal struck.

I was out and I was fucked.

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