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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## Into the Light

Niki Rhodes was a heroin addict.  
She says CrossFit helped save her.

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By Niki Rhodes

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All images: Niki Rhodes and Yale Jesser

Let's start on a foggy night in July 2008 in San Francisco.

I'm waiting for the arrival of my only tool for survival. One month earlier I turned 25. As I wait, I wonder how I have made it this far in life—as if turning a year older was some sort of feat. For most this is not a serious accomplishment, but for a girl in the depths of a chronic heroin addiction, turning 25 was nothing short of a miracle.

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I'm cold and the fog is so thick it leaves a layer of mist on my face, stinging my skin. The chills and sweat of the "sickness" of withdrawal has made me sensitive to cold, and I wonder what is taking this bitch so long.

Fast-forward.

I'm lying on a cement floor, not sure where. Nausea and vomiting have taken over. If I should be scared of this foreign place, it doesn't occur to me. Two weeks into being in jail I realize where I am. The morning I realize this, I feel relief. The next two weeks of life are filled with boredom and court dates. When I am released, I have a court order to yet another rehab. Maybe life will fare well for me in a new place, and off to sunny Palm Springs I go. Here we go for another attempt at sobriety. I am not optimistic.

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**"I don't care if you never do anything for a career and sit around and mindlessly paint forever. Just please, please don't do this."**

**—Niki Rhodes' father**

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My dad's face looks tired. He has lost weight. I think back to the one time he visited me in jail. He was sobbing.

"Niki, I don't care if you are never successful in anything you do in life," he starts, choking back tears.

I cannot look at his eyes.

"I don't care if you never do anything for a career and sit around and mindlessly paint forever. Just please, please don't do this," he continues.

He is begging me.

I try to answer him.

I have no words.

Time for visiting is up.

I leave him crying behind the glass, where I cannot comfort him.

I am a failure.



***An artist since she was a child, Rhodes kept painting even through her darkest days.***

I was so excited to have been released from jail that my first week in rehab was heaven, it seemed. I had a bed, a bathroom with a door and freedom to walk around. Wow, the things we take for granted. They had a gym, and we were required to go to for an hour. Working out was always miserable to me, so I would slowly walk on the treadmill until my time was up. Within a week, I was over being there and was just wishing I could go back to jail so people would stop asking me questions about my feelings: "Blah, blah, blah, your addiction is a disease, blah, blah, AA meetings, blah."

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My counselor is talking and I am a million miles away.

I was told I wasn't ready, I had personality issues. I had sexual problems. I had more than addiction. It was a long process. On Day 75 of a 90-day sentence, I left rehab upon staff request. Dad was pissed. I was 500 miles from home with nowhere to go.



***An anti-exercise hippie for most of her life, Rhodes found something she was missing in CrossFit.***

The last time I got loaded was shortly after this. In my mind, I felt I was doomed. I thought there was no other way of life for me. I was full of self-defeat and sorrow. I was afraid and acting cowardly.

Nov. 9, 2008, I woke up on a friend's couch to a phone call from my dad. It was my sister's birthday and my first day sober again. I took this as a sign. I texted my big sis "Happy Birthday," and I went to check myself in to another rehab. Not a nice one; one for people with no money, nowhere to go and just a tiny bit of hope. I did everything they asked, starting with shutting up and doing the next right thing. I lived there for four months, got my foot in AA and worked the steps. The first 10 months of my sobriety, my family stepped in and helped me out a ton.

### **Enter Chad Kibbey**

What I didn't tell you yet is that I left my heart in San Francisco, in the possession of an incredible man and artist. I left it with him because he had owned it for seven years. He also was a heroin addict. We split so we could get

clean, so we could have a chance. I had given up on the notion I could ever love someone else. Not so much given up; it actually just never crossed my mind.

Chad Kibbey, five days out of the big house at an AA convention, was not the boy you bring home to mom. He was new to AA, and with good intentions I offered my hand to help. We instantly became best friends.

This part could be a story all in itself—the process of falling in love, of becoming one with someone, of growing together, and finding out who we are and what we are made of. So let's take you right to the life-changing parts. I don't want to keep you here all year.

"What do you like?" I asked him, hoping for a long list of interests I could compare with my own for my childish compatibility test.

"I don't know," he said. "I really don't. You may think that is crazy."

In my mind, I am truly shocked.

"It's OK," I said. "We are just going to have to figure that out."

I thought about that statement he made to me many times afterward. I still remember it fondly today. I told him I used to paint and how I love art. He looked at photos of my art with amazement and interest, and for the first time since getting clean, I was proud of something besides doing the 12 steps of AA. It was the first moment I realized that life could be made up of more than just "not using drugs."

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## **He was solid muscle and into health and fitness. He was like a bizarre animal to me.**

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He brought me my first client who commissioned a painting and then three more. I have not stopped painting since.

Chad spent most of his time at the gym. A different kind of man than I was used to. He was solid muscle and into health and fitness. He was like a bizarre animal to me. I was always around long-haired, cigarette-smoking art geeks. He was strange, masculine, ambitious and made things happen.



I have always been scattered and easily distracted—head in the clouds, wondering about the stars and the universe and who knows what else. He brought me down to Earth, and I pulled him into the clouds.

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**There is no one braver on the planet than the person turning his or her back on comfort to the unknown, following a passion.**

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We heard of some sort of fitness competition called The Marine Corps challenge at a local CrossFit gym. He was so into fitness I decided to go along. It was a chaotic scene. People lifting, jumping and pushing as fast as they could. Even to an anti-exercise hippie artist like me, it was exciting. The owner of the gym gave me a free one-week membership. It was awful and painful, and the most fun I had ever had. I was hooked. We both became regular fixtures at the gym, attending sometimes more than one class a day. My life was changed. I had a second passion.

“You love CrossFit and health and fitness, which is the answer to what you like. You should be doing that for a living. Don't sell yourself short by making it a hobby,” I told Chad as we were driving home one night.

He looked over to me and placed his hand on my leg. He looked thoughtful. I knew he had heard me. We had answered the question I had asked so long before.

When Chad quit his job, I was not surprised. He had saved all his money while working behind the bar and was ready to pursue his dreams. Off he went to make them happen. There is no one braver on the planet than the person turning his or her back on comfort to the unknown, following a passion. Operation **CrossFit Shifted** had begun. Helping build this CrossFit community has changed my life.

Let me rewind and explain to you that CrossFit is not just working out but also a lifestyle. Let me also say that every time I have done a CrossFit workout, there is a moment where I feel like I cannot go on. As I push through those feelings of pain and fear, I come out victorious on the other

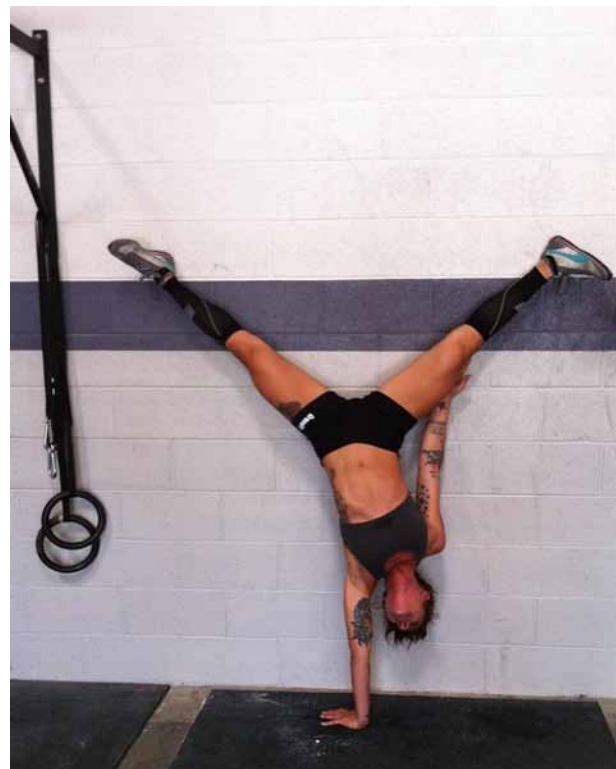
side and a part of me grows. The good part of me that has courage and never quits—the part of me that was stifled for years of neglect and drug abuse.

Then there is the community.

When you go through workouts like Murph, you feel as if you have survived a traumatic event with these people. That kind of bond is unparalleled. I imagine people who have survived a shipwreck feel similar.

“We will build a CrossFit gym that will be an inspiration to this valley,” Chad used to say.

And that is exactly what we did. The gym has about 60 consistent members, and the whole town is buzzing about it. I cannot think of this place without tears in my eyes. It is a place where lives change for the better. Where people find out how far they can push themselves. I have watched women come in and have fear in their eyes and low self-esteem. Two months later they are on top of their world and are truly proud of themselves. To be proud of yourself is profound. It is a gift of life.



***With every WOD, CrossFit reinforces a sense of victory, a feeling of triumph against pain and fear.***

If you would have told me three years ago that I would have dedicated my life to fitness and helping others, I would have deemed you another crazy person on the streets of San Francisco. I had nothing to offer this world.

Today I am worth something. I love myself and my life. Since helping to open that gym, I have parted ways with my dear sweet Chad. He continues to make changes in people's lives. We are both thriving in our community. He runs a program for troubled teens at CrossFit Shifted, and I am a Level 1 trainer at [CrossFit Palm Springs](#).

However, not a day goes by that I am not grateful for that life-changing love. I am a stronger and better person who has committed to stay in the light.

I am writing this story for the people who have helped me along the way: my loving father, my big sister, my entire family, AA, CrossFit, Chad, every person I trained and continue to train. The list is endless.

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**My success today is measured  
in my self-worth, which I can  
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My success today is measured in my self-worth, which I can proudly state I have a lot of.

Today I will stay in the light. I have walked through the dark and found that the light is a choice. With that choice, I am free. Free to think, to write, to love, to create, to be myself. With that choice, I walk forward to the unknown, to greatness, through fear. Today, although hundreds of miles away from where I was born, I am home.



### **About the Author**

*Niki Rhodes lives in Palm Desert, Calif., and is a CrossFit Level 1 trainer at [CrossFit Palm Springs](#). She also spends her time painting at [Niki Rhodes Art](#).*