

STRAIGHT OUTTA DARKNESS

A testimony of the grace and forgiveness of the Lord Jesus Christ

As told to Terry Solley

John "Big Sky" Montana knows darkness. His adult life was defined by anger and violence; handling all of his problems with violence. That crazy life made him a part of one of the biggest drug busts in Houston with many labs taken down at once, sending shock waves through the drug world. He narrowly missed that bullet.

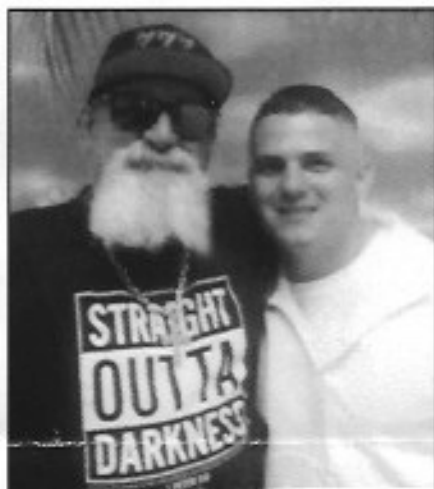
But he wasn't just in the drug game, the drug game was in him... shot into his veins, sending liquid destruction coursing through his body and destroying everything in its wake; including his family.

John, one of Big Sky's two children, says that growing up with a father with a drug addiction may have not been the normal life for a child, but it was his "normal". If his mother, also an addict, was not on the receiving end of his anger, John was. She left when he was seven years old, taking his little sister with her. Now John was left alone with his addicted, angry father and he felt abandoned and afraid. His mother did not want him and the father who was supposed to protect him did the complete opposite.

Big Sky never meant to become a drug addict or to destroy his family, but that is who he was and what he did. With his wife no longer around to bear the brunt of his anger, his son became his target. For several years it was just the two of them. Even though his abuse was harsh, John idolized his father and wanted his father's love more than anything. Instead he got the part of him that came from the deep darkness inside, fueled by the raging addict he was. Every slap and curse word drove a wedge between them.

While Big Sky found escape in his addiction, John found his escape in music. At a young age, John often found solace hiding in a dark closet, with only a guitar to keep him company and the soft strum of the guitar's strings to drown out the pain and confusion inside him. Just like drugs became a part of who his dad was, music became a part of him, filling the empty space inside where his parents' love should have been.

Big Sky may have been lost, but he wasn't a lost cause. He had a praying mother, who always believed that God had a plan and a purpose for his life. She knew that somehow, some way, God would reach down into the darkness with the penetrating light of His love. And that is exactly what God did when He sent Big Sky a christian woman who was



willing to love the unlovable. Charlene entered his life and turned his world upside-down. For the first time in a very long time, he wanted something different. He wanted to be a good husband to her; he wanted to be a good father to his children. He wanted more than the drugs. He wanted freedom; freedom from the pain, the anger, the addiction and the darkness that lived inside of him. But time and time again, he found himself hiding from Charlene the

addiction she had no knowledge of, with a needle in his arm and burning shame in his heart; once again enslaved to a master that had no mercy.

Meanwhile, John did not know what to think about his new stepmom. He carried deep, emotional scars from his mother abandoning him and his father abusing him, so it was difficult to trust or accept the unconditional love she offered him. John pushed her away, rebelling against any sense of stability she brought into his life. And he rebelled against his dad too, not easily forgetting the abuse he had experienced. It wasn't long before he was a messed up teenager, pushing everyone away, addicted to porn and promiscuity, and like his father, using drugs. The only thing John really cared about was music. It soothed his soul and calmed the storms building inside him.

Big Sky could never understand why Charlene stuck around when she had every reason not to. He could not understand that kind of love or that kind of woman. Like his mother, she prayed for him, somehow knowing that God was working in his life and therefore, in all their lives. Real love, true love; is often tough love. That tough love came into clear focus when she confronted him about his addiction that had just been revealed to her. She demanded him to make a choice: he could have the drugs or he could have his home and family - but not both. He chose to figure out how to be clean and sober with the support of his family. It was not easy and it was a intense process, but he turned away from the drugs that had been his dark master for so many years. When he put down the needle, he picked up the Bible, confessed his sins to God, and turned his life over to a new Master - Jesus Christ! Big Sky became a new man by the power of God!

As Big Sky's life was finally falling into place, John's was falling apart. Soon married, with two children, he continued the dysfunctional cycle of abuse passed down to him. Like his father, John often exploded in anger, taking his anger and frustration out on those he loved the most - his family. His home became a mirror image of the home he grew up in as a child - full of rage and abuse. Eventually, John's anger would result in him being arrested and sentenced to 30 years in prison.

Big Sky never thought that some day he would stand in a courtroom and watch his son be convicted and sentenced to prison, but that is where he found himself. And it crushed him. As a father, he wanted to save his son, to make all of John's problems go away, to trade places with him if he could. But he couldn't. There on the sidewalk in front of the courthouse, his plea was "Why Lord? I'm finally clean and sober. I've turned my life over to You. Why this now? Why my son? I don't understand."

Big Sky had reached a pivotal moment in his life, a testing of his faith. Was he going to continue trusting in God when everything seemed dark and hopeless, or was he going to run back to what he had taken refuge in so many times before - a whisky bottle and a needle? He trusted in God. Like his mother had done for so many years on his behalf, he began crying out to God for his son's salvation and safety.

John walked into prison a shattered and broken young man, who lost his wife, his children, and who would spend at least the next 15 years incarcerated. On top of that, the guilt and shame he felt for destroying his family was almost too much to bare. There were moments when he felt like his life was over. **However, he had no idea that God had a calling on his life or the length that God would go to see that calling fulfilled.**

God heard his family's prayers! John soon found himself surrounded by Christian men who began pouring into his life. It was the Christ-like love of these fellow prisoners, whose lives had been transformed by the gospel, that impacted John the most. It was so much different than anything he had ever experienced. All he ever knew was anger and rage - first his father's, then his own. But John saw something in these men that he wanted - a true faith, a living faith that would change him from the inside out. One day, after a long talk with his grandmother in visitation, John made the best decision of his life - he placed his faith and trust in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. From that day on, John has never been the same.

God began to put the broken pieces of Big Sky's and John's lives back together, molding and shaping them into the men He wanted them to be. Big Sky began doing ministry with Bikers For Christ, slowly growing and maturing in his faith; and learning to trust God with those he loved the most - his family. In 2012, John who had recently earned his GED and a culinary arts certification, was accepted into the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary-Darrington (prison) Campus. After four intense years of study, he received a Bachelor's degree in Biblical Studies and upon graduation, was sent out as a Field Minister to other prisons. While attending seminary, the music that was birthed inside him in the dark closet of his childhood and developed as a teenager, was given new godly inspiration. Soon he became the worship leader for the Seminary and began writing songs with fellow classmate, Terry Solley, including "New Man",

written for their fathers. John was able to perform this special song for Big Sky in 2013, during a ministry service by Bikers For Christ Motorcycle Ministry. It blew John away to be able to look into his father's tear-filled eyes and tell him that he knew his father was a new man, at the same time acknowledging it took the new man in him to see the new man in his father. There, on a stage in a maximum security prison chapel, God performed another miracle. He broke down all the barriers built up between father and son over the years, washed away a lifetime of hurt and pain, and knitted a father and son's hearts back together again.

Life came full circle for Big Sky a few years later. He had once stood tall in the corrupt drug world, now he stood tall and proud in his Bikers For Christ vest behind the pulpit to deliver the commencement prayer for his son's 2016 graduating class. As he stood there, lost for the words he had practiced and refined so carefully, staring out at the 33 graduates and their family members, all he could think was, "Why me, Lord? An ex-drug addict like me?" It was a humbling and extremely emotional moment for Big Sky, as he was reminded how far the Lord had brought him and his son and a confirmation that God so often uses the foolish things of the world to confound the wise.

John stood in his cap and gown, while his father as the pastor of the little country church SouthSide Chapel in Ore City, Texas, prayed. John never thought when he came to prison that he would be where he was, about to graduate from seminary with a Bachelor's degree and be sent out as a Field Minister to help change the prison culture. Nor did he ever think his father, who was once only full of drug fueled rage, would be where he was today, standing behind a pulpit on a stage full of politicians and dignitaries, with tears streaming down his face, praying. John knew that they were both miracles - a testament to God's amazing love and mercy - that somehow, some way, God reached down and pulled them both straight outta darkness.

Big Sky could hardly believe how much the Lord had accomplished in his and John's lives over the years. He went from standing in a courtroom, watching his son being sentenced to 30 years in prison to standing on a stage full of dignitaries watching his son receive his college diploma. His emotions overwhelmed him. He forgot where he was and who he was with. All he saw was the son he loved so much and was so proud of walking across the stage toward him. He was never going to let anything or anyone separate him from his son again. He barreled through the crowded stage and wrapped his son up in a bear hug. John, diploma in hand and a smile on his face, wrapped his arms around his daddy, lost in the love of his father that he longed for so many years his life.

Today, God has completely restored Big Sky and John's relationship. John says, "As a young child, my father poured his anger out on me from his own hurt and pain; today, he pours his love on me as his son, whom he is proud of." And in return, John pours his love out on his father, whom he is proud of. God now uses Big Sky and John to reach others who are where they once were: Big Sky from outside prison walls and John from the inside. **Both have the same mission: to lead broken and hurting people home to the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ, to reach out and help pull them straight outta darkness!**