Drugs and guns, crime and drugs, drugs and lies, liquor and drugs. If there was one constant in Joe Davis’s life, it was drugs, the substance that ruled his existence. Personal tragedy was not enough to turn him off the path leading to the brink of self-destruction. Finally Joe was faced with a moment of decision. The choice he made has opened doors into a world that the old Joe barely knew existed.

**Words to Watch**

- *option* (6): choice
- *rehabilitated* (10): brought back to a good and healthy life
- *encountered* (20): met
- *unruly* (26): disorderly
- *hushed* (27): quiet

Joe Davis was the coolest fourteen-year-old he’d ever seen. He went to school when he felt like it. He hung out with a wild crowd. He started drinking some wine, smoking some marijuana. “Nobody could tell me anything,” he says today. “I thought the sun rose and set on me.” There were rules at home, and Joe didn’t do rules. So he moved in with his grandmother.
Joe Davis was the coolest sixteen-year-old he’d ever seen.

Joe’s parents gave up on his schooling and signed him out of the tenth grade. Joe went to work in his dad’s body shop, but that didn’t last long. There were rules there, too, and Joe didn’t do rules. By the time he was in his mid-teens, Joe was taking pills that got him high, and he was even using cocaine. He was also smoking marijuana all the time and drinking booze all the time.

Joe Davis was the coolest twenty-five-year-old he’d ever seen.

He was living with a woman almost twice his age. The situation wasn’t great, but she paid the bills, and certainly Joe couldn’t pay them. He had his habit to support, which by now had grown to include heroin. Sometimes he’d work at a low-level job, if someone else found it for him. He might work long enough to get a paycheck and then spend it all at once. Other times he’d be caught stealing and get fired first. A more challenging job was not an option, even if he had bothered to look for one. He couldn’t put words together to form a sentence, unless the sentence was about drugs. Filling out an application was difficult. He wasn’t a strong reader. He couldn’t do much with numbers. Since his drug habit had to be paid for, he started to steal. First he stole from his parents, then from his sister. Then he stole from the families of people he knew. But eventually the people he knew wouldn’t let him in their houses, since they knew he’d steal from them. So he got a gun and began holding people up. He chose elderly people and others who weren’t likely to fight back. The holdups kept him in drug money, but things at home were getting worse. His woman’s teenage daughter was getting out of line. Joe decided it was up to him to discipline her. The girl didn’t like it. She told her boyfriend. One day, the boyfriend called Joe out of the house.

BANG.

Joe Davis was in the street, his nose in the dirt. His mind was still cloudy from his most recent high, but he knew something was terribly wrong with his legs. He couldn’t move them; he couldn’t even feel them. His mother came out of her nearby house and ran to him. As he heard her screams, he imagined what she was seeing. Her oldest child, her first baby, her bright boy who could have been and done anything, was lying in the gutter, a junkie with a .22 caliber bullet lodged in his spine.

The next time Joe’s head cleared, he was in a hospital bed, blinking up at his parents as they stared helplessly at him. The doctors had done all they could; Joe would live, to everyone’s surprise. But he was a paraplegic—paralyzed from his chest down. It was done. It was over. It was written in stone. He would not walk again. He would not be able to control his bladder or bowels. He would not be able to make love as he did before. He would not be able to hold people up, then hurry away.
Joe spent the next eight months being moved between several Philadelphia hospitals, where he was shown the ropes of life as a paraplegic. Officially he was being “rehabilitated”—restored to a productive life. There was just one problem: Joe. “To be rehabilitated, you must have been habilitated first,” he says today. “That wasn’t me.” During his stay in the hospitals, he found ways to get high every day.

Finally Joe was released from the hospital. He returned in his wheelchair to the house he’d been living in when he was shot. He needed someone to take care of him, and his woman friend was still willing. His drug habit was as strong as ever, but his days as a stickup man were over. So he started selling drugs. Business was good. The money came in fast, and his own drug use accelerated even faster.

A wheelchair-bound junkie doesn’t pay much attention to his health and cleanliness. Eventually Joe developed his first bedsore: a deep, rotting wound that ate into his flesh, overwhelming him with its foul odor. He was admitted to Magee Rehabilitation Hospital, where he spent six months on his stomach while the ghastly wound slowly healed. Again, he spent his time in the hospital using drugs. This time his drug use did not go unnoticed. Soon before he was scheduled to be discharged, hospital officials kicked him out. He returned to his friend’s house and his business. But then police raided the house. They took the drugs, they took the money.

“I really went downhill then,” says Joe. With no drugs and no money to get drugs, life held little meaning. He began fighting with the woman he was living with. “When you’re in the state I was in, you don’t know how to be nice to anybody,” he says. Finally she kicked him out of the house. When his parents took him in, Joe did a little selling from their house, trying to keep it low-key, out of sight, so they wouldn’t notice. He laughs at the notion today. “I thought I could control junkies and tell them, ‘Business only during certain hours.’” Joe got high when his monthly Social Security check came, high when he’d make a purchase for someone else and get a little something for himself, high when a visitor would share drugs with him. It wasn’t much of a life. “There I was,” he says, “a junkie with no education, no job, no friends, no means of supporting myself. And now I had a spinal cord injury.”

Then came October 25, 1988. Joe had just filled a prescription for pills to control his muscle spasms. Three hundred of the powerful muscle relaxants were there for the taking. He swallowed them all.

“It wasn’t the spinal cord injury that did it,” he says. “It was the addiction.”

Joe tried hard to die, but it didn’t work. His sister heard him choking and called for help. He was rushed to the hospital, where he lay in a coma for four days.
Joe has trouble finding the words to describe what happened next.

“I had . . . a spiritual awakening, for lack of any better term,” he says. “My soul had been cleansed. I knew my life could be better. And from that day to this, I have chosen not to get high.”

Drugs, he says, “are not even a temptation. That life is a thing that happened to someone else.”

Joe knew he wanted to turn himself around, but he needed help in knowing where to start. He enrolled in Magee Hospital’s vocational rehabilitation program. For six weeks, he immersed himself in discussions, tests, and exercises to help him determine the kind of work he might be suited for. The day he finished the rehab program, a nurse at Magee told him about a receptionist’s job in the spinal cord injury unit at Thomas Jefferson Hospital. He went straight to the hospital and met Lorraine Buchanan, coordinator of the unit. “I told her where I was and where I wanted to go,” Joe says. “I told her, ‘If you give me a job, I will never disappoint you. I’ll quit first if I see I can’t live up to it.’” She gave him the job. The wheelchair-bound junkie, the man who’d never been able to hold a job, the drug-dependent stickup man who “couldn’t put two words together to make a sentence” was now the first face, the first voice that patients encountered when they entered the spinal cord unit. “I’d never talked to people like that,” says Joe, shaking his head. “I had absolutely no background. But Lorraine and the others, they taught me to speak. Taught me to greet people. Taught me to handle the phone.” How did he do in his role as a receptionist? A huge smile breaks across Joe’s face as he answers, “Excellent.”

Soon, his personal life also took a very positive turn. A month after Joe started his job, he was riding a city bus to work. A woman recovering from knee surgery was in another seat. The two smiled, but didn’t speak.

A week later, Joe spotted the woman again. The bus driver sensed something was going on and encouraged Joe to approach her. Her name was Terri. She was a receptionist in a law office. On their first date, Joe laid his cards on the table. He told her his story. He also told her he was looking to get married. “That about scared her away,” Joe recalls. “She said she wasn’t interested in marriage. I asked, ‘Well, suppose you did meet someone you cared about who cared about you and treated you well. Would you still be opposed to the idea of marriage?’ She said no, she would consider it then. I said, ‘Well, that’s all I ask.’”

Four months later, as the two sat over dinner in a restaurant, Joe handed Terri a box tied with a ribbon. Inside was a smaller box. Then a smaller box, and a smaller one still. Ten boxes in all. Inside the smallest was an engagement ring. After another six months, the two were married in the law office where Terri works. Since then, she has been Joe’s constant source of support, encouragement, and love.
After Joe had started work at Jefferson Hospital, he talked with his supervisor, Lorraine, about his dreams of moving on to something bigger, more challenging. She encouraged him to try college. He had taken and passed the high-school general equivalency diploma (GED) exam years before, almost as a joke, when he was recovering from his bedsores at Magee. Now he enrolled in a university mathematics course. He didn’t do well. “I wasn’t ready,” Joe says. “I’d been out of school seventeen years. I dropped out.” Before he could let discouragement overwhelm him, he enrolled at Community College of Philadelphia (CCP), where he signed up for basic math and English courses. He worked hard, sharpening study skills he had never developed in his earlier school days. Next he took courses toward an associate’s degree in mental health and social services, along with a certificate in addiction studies. Five years later, he graduated from CCP, the first member of his family ever to earn a college degree. He went on to receive a bachelor’s degree in mental health from Hahnemann University in Philadelphia.

Now Joe is in his final year in the University of Pennsylvania’s Master of Social Work program. Besides being a student, he is employed as a psychotherapist at John F. Kennedy Mental Health Center in Philadelphia. His dream now is to get into the “real world,” the world of young men and women immersed in drugs, violence, and crime. In fact, in his field-placement work for school, Joe mentors a group of at-risk adolescent boys. Also, whenever he can, he speaks at local schools through a program called Think First. He tells young people about his drug use, his shooting, and his experience with paralysis.

At a presentation at a disciplinary school outside of Philadelphia, Joe gazes with quiet authority at the unruly crowd of teenagers. He begins to speak, telling them about speedballs and guns, fast money and bedsores, even about the leg bag that collects his urine. At first, the kids snort with laughter at his honesty. When they laugh, he waits patiently, then goes on. Gradually the room grows quieter as Joe tells them of his life and then asks them about theirs. “What’s important to you? What are your goals?” he says. “I’m still in school because when I was young, I chose the dead-end route many of you are on. But now I’m doing what I have to do to get where I want to go. What are you doing?”

He tells them more, about broken dreams, about his parents’ grief, about the former friends who turned away from him when he was no longer a source of drugs. He tells them of the continuing struggle to regain the trust of people he once abused. He tells them about the desire that consumes him now, the desire to make his community a better place to live. His wish is that no young man or woman should have to walk the
path he’s walked in order to value the precious gift of life. The teenagers are now silent. They look at this broad-shouldered black man in his wheelchair, his head and beard close-shaven, a gold ring in his ear. His hushed words settle among them like gentle drops of cleansing rain. “What are you doing? Where are you going?” he asks them. “Think about it. Think about me.”

Joe Davis is the coolest forty-four-year-old you’ve ever seen.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Freewrite for ten minutes on one of the following.

1. Did you enjoy reading this selection? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think Joe tried to kill himself?
3. Have you ever known someone who has turned his or her life around, as Joe has? What were the circumstances?

VOCABULARY CHECK

A. Circle the letter of the word or phrase that best completes each of the following four items.

1. In the sentence below, the word restored means
   a. held back.
   b. punished.
   c. returned.
   d. paid.

   “Officially he was being ‘rehabilitated’—restored to a productive life.” (Paragraph 10)

2. In the sentence below, the word accelerated means
   a. increased.
   b. grown less serious.
   c. disappeared.
   d. helped.

   “The money came in fast, and his own drug use accelerated even faster.” (Paragraph 11)
3. In the sentence below, the word *ghastly* means
   a. quite small.
   b. very unpleasant.
   c. caused by a gun.
   d. illegal.

   “He was admitted to Magee Rehabilitation Hospital, where he spent six months on his stomach while the ghastly wound slowly healed.” (Paragraph 12)

4. In the sentence below, the word *immersed* means
   a. totally ignored.
   b. greatly angered.
   c. deeply involved.
   d. often harmed.

   “For six weeks, he immersed himself in discussions, tests, and exercises to help him determine the kind of work he might be suited for.” (Paragraph 20)

B. Circle the letter of the answer that best completes each of the following four items. Each item uses a word (or form of a word) from “Words to Watch.”

5. The usual *options* after graduating from high school include
   a. happiness mixed with sadness for leaving a familiar place.
   b. going to college, getting a job, or joining the army.
   c. looking forward to your first high-school reunion.

6. “I *encountered* a poisonous snake on my camping trip,” David announced. Chris responded,
   a. “Who was more afraid when you met—it or you?”
   b. “Why in the world would you eat a poisonous animal?”
   c. “Why did you kill it?”

7. Because their twin boys are so *unruly*, the Millers
   a. have a hard time finding anyone willing to baby-sit for them.
   b. teach a parenting class to help other parents raise similarly well-behaved children.
   c. worry about why the boys are so quiet and inactive.

8. One place that does not usually have a *hushed* atmosphere is a
   a. church.
   b. circus.
   c. library.
READING CHECK

Central Point and Main Ideas

1. Which sentence best expresses the central point of the selection?
   a. Most people cannot improve their lives once they turn to drugs and crime.
   b. Joe Davis overcame a life of drugs and crime and a disability to lead a rich, meaningful life.
   c. The rules set by Joe Davis’s parents caused him to leave home and continue a life of drugs and crime.
   d. Joe Davis’s friends turned away from him once they learned he was no longer a source of drugs.

2. A main idea may cover more than one paragraph. Which sentence best expresses the main idea of paragraphs 21–23?
   a. The first sentence of paragraph 21
   b. The second sentence of paragraph 21
   c. The first sentence of paragraph 22
   d. The first sentence of paragraph 23

3. Which sentence best expresses the main idea of paragraph 24?
   a. It was difficult for Joe to do college work after being out of school for so many years.
   b. Lorraine Buchanan encouraged Joe to go to college.
   c. Joe’s determination enabled him to overcome a lack of academic preparation and eventually succeed in college.
   d. If students would stay in high school and work hard, they would not have to go to the trouble of getting a high-school GED.

Key Supporting Details

4. Joe Davis quit high school
   a. when he was 14.
   b. when he got a good job at a hospital.
   c. when he was in the tenth grade.
   d. after he was shot.

5. Joe tried to kill himself by
   a. swallowing muscle-relaxant pills.
   b. shooting himself.
   c. overdosing on heroin.
   d. not eating or drinking.
6. According to the selection, Joe first met his wife  
   a. in the hospital, where she was a nurse.  
   b. on a city bus, where they were both passengers.  
   c. on the job, where she was also a receptionist.  
   d. at Community College of Philadelphia, where she was also a student.

7. Joe decided to stop using drugs  
   a. when he met his future wife.  
   b. right after he was shot.  
   c. when he awoke from a suicide attempt.  
   d. when he was hired as a receptionist.

Inferences

8. We can conclude from paragraph 26 that  
   a. Joe is willing to reveal very personal information about himself in order to reach young people with his story.  
   b. Joe was angry at the Philadelphia students who laughed at parts of his story.  
   c. Joe is glad he did not go to college directly from high school.  
   d. Joe is still trying to figure out what his life goals are.

The Writer's Craft

9. When the author writes “Joe Davis was the coolest fourteen- [or sixteen- or twenty-five-] year-old he’d ever seen,” she is actually expressing  
   a. her approval of the way Joe was living then.  
   b. her envy of Joe’s status in the community.  
   c. her mistaken opinion of Joe at these stages in his life.  
   d. Joe’s mistaken opinion of himself at these stages in his life.

10. To conclude her article, Johnson uses  
    a. a series of statistics.  
    b. an anecdote followed by a personal comment.  
    c. a summary of her main idea.  
    d. a prediction of what will happen to Joe in the future.

Discussion Questions

1. When speaking of his suicide attempt, Joe said, “It wasn’t the spinal cord injury that did it. It was the addiction.” What do you think Joe meant? Why do you think he blamed his addiction, rather than his disability, for his decision to try to end his life?
2. Why do you think the students Joe spoke to laughed as he shared personal details of his life? Why did they later quiet down? What effect do you think his presentation had on these students?

3. Joe speaks of wanting to “regain the trust of people he once abused.” In other words, he hopes they will give him a second chance. Have you ever given a second chance to someone who had abused your trust? Alternatively, have you ever sought a second chance from someone you had wronged? What happened?

4. Joe wants young people to learn the lessons he has learned without having to experience his hardships. What lessons have you learned in your life that you would like to pass on to others?

**PARAGRAPH ASSIGNMENTS**

1. Like Joe Davis, many of us have learned painful lessons from life. And like him, we wish we could pass those lessons on to young people to save them from making the same mistakes.

   Write a one-paragraph letter to a young person you know. In it, use your experience to pass on a lesson you wish he or she would learn. Begin with a topic sentence in which you state the lesson you’d like to teach, as in these examples:

   - My own humiliating experience taught me that shoplifting is a very bad idea.
   - I learned the hard way that abandoning your friends for the “cool” crowd will backfire on you.
   - The sad experience of a friend has taught me that teenage girls should not give in to their boyfriends’ pressure for sex.
   - Dropping out of high school may seem like a great idea, but what happened to my brother should convince you otherwise.

   Your letter should describe in detail the lesson you learned and how you learned it.

2. Although Joe’s parents loved him, they weren’t able to stop him from using drugs, skipping school, and doing other self-destructive things. Think of a time that you have seen someone you cared about doing something you thought was bad for him or her. What did you do? What did you want to do?

   Write a paragraph in which you describe the situation and how you responded. In it, make sure you answer the following questions:
• What was the person doing?
• Why was I concerned about him or her?
• Did I feel there was anything I could do?
• Did I take any action?
• How did the situation finally turn out?

ESSAY ASSIGNMENTS

1. One of Joe’s goals is to regain the trust of the friends and family members he abused during his earlier life. Have you ever given a second chance to someone who treated you poorly? Write an essay about what happened. You could begin with a thesis statement something like this: “Although my closest friend betrayed my trust, I decided to give him another chance.”

   You could then go on to structure the rest of your essay in this way:

   • In your first supporting paragraph, explain what the person did to lose your trust. Maybe it was an obviously hurtful action, like physically harming you or stealing from you. Or perhaps it was something more subtle, like insulting or embarrassing you.
   • In your second supporting paragraph, explain why you decided to give the person another chance.
   • In your third supporting paragraph, tell what happened as a result of your giving the person a second chance. Did he or she treat you better this time? Or did the bad treatment start over again?
   • In your concluding paragraph, provide some final thoughts about what you learned from the experience.

   Alternatively, write an essay about a time that you were given a second chance by someone whose trust you had abused. Follow the same pattern of development.

2. Obviously, young people often do not learn from the experiences of others. For example, despite all the evidence about how harmful smoking is to health, young people continue to smoke. The same can be said for careless driving, drug and alcohol abuse, and other reckless behaviors.

   Write an essay in which you explore possible reasons why young people often disregard the experience of others and, instead, learn their lessons the hard way.