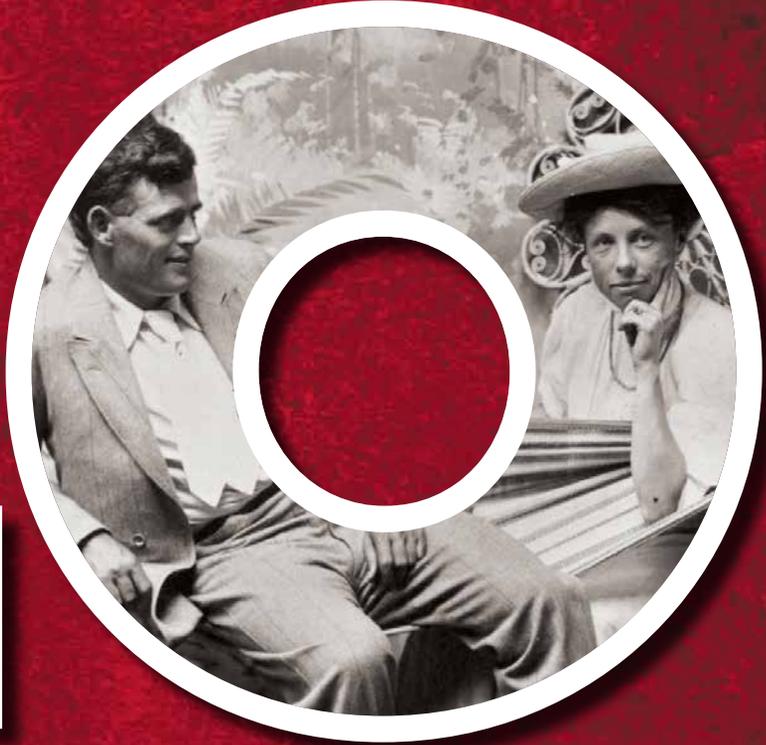


LOVE IN THE VALLEY OF THE MOON

# Valley of the Moon

SONOMA VALLEY

LIFESTYLE ■ CULTURE ■ COMMUNITY



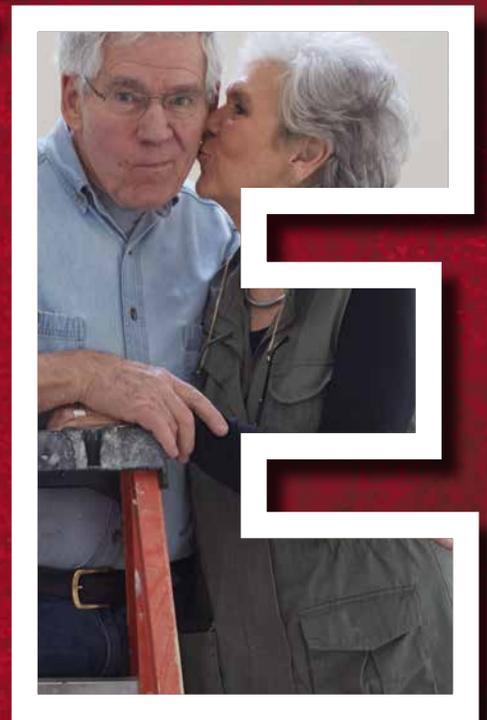
REAL LOVE,  
ROMANCE,  
CHOCOLATE,  
WINE

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RWANDA,  
GORILLAS,  
POST-GENOCIDE

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NIKITA DUCARROZ  
MAKES THE  
OLYMPICS



# Beautiful Boy Comes to Sonoma

DAVID AND NIC SHEFF BRING ADDICTION DISCUSSION TO SONOMA SPEAKER SERIES.

**D**uring 2018, 12,987 people in the United States died of a methamphetamine overdose. The number of U.S. deaths from opioid overdoses in 2017 was much higher—47,600, according to the National Center for Health Statistics.

Use of methamphetamine—commonly in crystalline form called “crystal meth”—is dramatically higher west of the Mississippi River, and the reverse is true of opioid addiction and overdose. The National Institute on Drug Abuse reports that treatment admissions for methamphetamine as the primary substance of use were less than 1 percent east of the Mississippi, but ranged from 12 to 29 percent in sites west of the Mississippi.

About 15 percent of all drug overdose deaths nationally in 2017 involved the meth category of drugs, but 50 percent of those deaths also involved an opioid.

And therein lies one of the difficulties in making sense of drug abuse statistics. Numerous addicts are polydrug abusers, combining an endless variety of drugs, often randomly. Common combinations are meth and cocaine, meth and heroin, Fentanyl and heroin, meth and MDMA (Ecstasy)—the list goes on and on, and alcohol is very often an additional part of the mix.

So when people overdose and die, it's not always easy to determine which drug actually killed them. And if they don't die, the impact of meth addiction is fre-

quently out of proportion to the number of users because it is such a physically and neurologically destructive drug, causing psychotic and violent behavior and inspiring high levels of theft, robbery, and assault.

In addition to the neurological and behavioral consequences of methamphetamine misuse, long-term users also suffer physical effects including radical weight loss, severe tooth decay, and subsequent tooth loss (called “meth mouth”) and skin sores caused by scratching imaginary insects under the skin.

Ask Sonoma police and deputies from the Sonoma County Sheriff's office the most challenging and troubling form of criminal behavior they encounter, and they will unhesitatingly say meth users, tweakers, speed freaks.

Meanwhile, imbedded in the previous sentence is a term that may be part of the problem—“criminal behavior.” Every police officer and patrol deputy will tell you the same story, over and over again: Someone is arrested with a baggie of crystal meth, booked into the county jail for possession, released on bail or on their own recognizance, or after a short term in the county jail. Then they are back on the street on probation, and soon they violate probation with another bag of meth, so they go back to jail, and the cycle continues. Endlessly.

Jail for meth users rarely solves the problem, and sometimes prolongs it. So the addiction crisis quickly transcends the criminal justice system and becomes an exponentially more complicated, medical, mental health, and moral challenge.

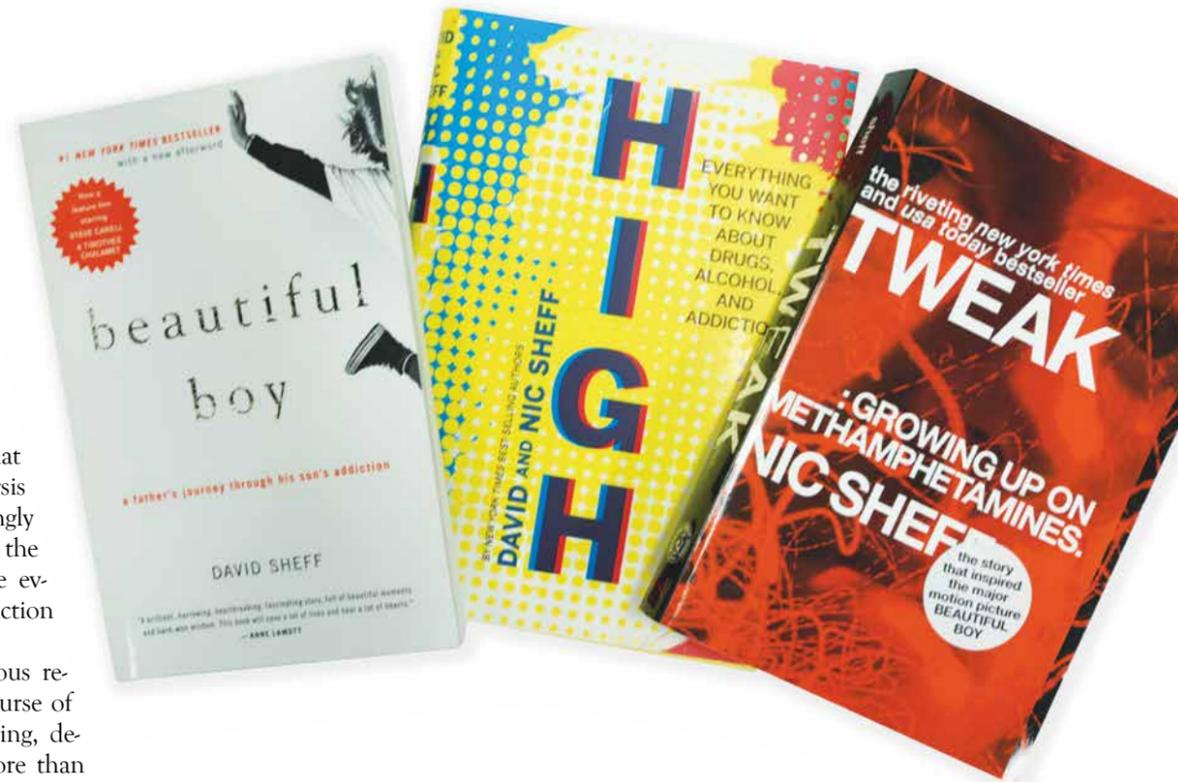
With all that said, it's time to meet David and Nic Sheff, a father and son now famous nationwide for the books each wrote about Nic's chronic addiction to crystal meth, and the subsequent, widely praised 2018 film, *Beautiful Boy*, starring Steve Carell and Timothy Chalamet.

The Sheffs will appear with the Sonoma Speakers Series on Monday, February 3.

Nic Sheff, emerging from a privileged West Marin childhood, isn't your stereotypical tweaker, but then again, part of the message of this multimedia story is that meth is an equal opportunity addiction.

David, a well-known journalist and former *Rolling Stone* contributor, wrote





*Beautiful Boy* in part as what feels like an act of catharsis and clearly in an increasingly desperate effort to mine the best information available everywhere on meth addiction and how to cure it.

Nic went through various rehab programs over the course of a decade and kept relapsing, despite sober periods of more than a year. Observing these repeated failures, David came to understand that even the best 12-step programs don't necessarily connect with the underlying pain and pathology that drive addiction. In fact, he is shocked to learn that most good rehab programs have a permanent success rate in single digits.

This passage from *Beautiful Boy* illustrates David's experience with Nic:

#### DAVID'S STORY

"After days without a word from Nic, he calls from the house of a former girlfriend. He is talking fast and obviously lying. He says he has quit on his own and has been sober for five days. I tell him that he has two choices as far as I am concerned: another try at rehab or the streets. My tough talk belies my impulse to rush over and take him in my arms.

He maintains that rehab is unnecessary—he will stop on his own—but I tell him that isn't negotiable. He indolently agrees to try again, finally concluding, 'Whatever.'

I drive to the girl's house and wait outside, idling the car on the cul-de-sac. Nic dully climbs in. I notice a black bruise on his cheek and a gash on his forehead. I ask what happened. He looks skyward and then he closes his eyes. 'It was no big

deal,' he says. 'Some asshole beat me up and robbed me.'

I yelp. "And it's *no big deal*?"

He looks weary and empty. He has no suitcase or backpack, nothing.

"What happened to your stuff?"

*"THE BOY SITTING NEAR ME IN THE CAR IS NOT NIC, NOR DOES HE KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THE CHILD I REMEMBER."*

"Everything was stolen."

Who is he? The boy sitting near me in the car is not Nic, nor does he know anything about the child I remember. As if corroborating my observation, he speaks at last.

"What the fuck am I doing here? This

is bullshit. I don't need rehab. It's bullshit. I'm leaving."

"Leaving? Where?"

"Paris."

"Ah, Paris."

"Getting out of this fucking country is what I need."

"What will you do in Paris?"

"Tom and David and I are going to play music in the Metro, set ourselves up with a little monkey, like the old organ grinders."

Over the next 24 hours, Nic's mood ranges from agitated to comatose. In addition to the monkey, his plans include backpacking to Mexico, joining the Peace Corps, and farming in South America, but each time he ultimately comes around to a grim resignation that he will return to rehab. Then he again says that he doesn't need it, he is sober, fuck you, and then he says he needs drugs and cannot survive without them. "Life sucks, which is why I get high."

What all this looks like through Nic's eyes is even more painful to experience. The crystal meth sewage drain he descends into takes him through a nightmare kaleidoscope of depravity as he

hustles every angle an addict can hustle for drugs. That primarily means buying, cutting, and selling crystal himself, stealing, writing bad checks, turning sexual tricks on the street as a prostitute, eating out of garbage cans, and exploiting friends he loves.

This is a passage from *Tweak: Growing Up On Methamphetamines* that picks up his story four years into a polydrug addiction constructed around a cornerstone of crystal meth:

#### NIC'S STORY

"I'd driven up from L.A. the night before and slept in my old, falling-apart Mazda, parked in a lot on the edge of the Presidio ... A friend of mine, Akira, had once lived there. He occupied a basement apartment on the edge of the Presidio. I hoped I'd find him still living there, but after I wandered around the house some—looking into the dust-covered windows—it was clear that the place was deserted. It was Akira who'd actually introduced me to crystal meth when I was eighteen. He was a friend of a friend. He did a lot of drugs and we immediately gravitated toward each other. Somehow that always seemed to happen—we addicts can always find one another. There must be some strange addict radar or something.

"Akira was like me, but more strung out at the time. He had dyed red, curling hair and dark, dark eyes. He was thin, emaciated, with hollowed-out features and narrow, dirty fingers. When he offered me that first line of meth, I didn't hesitate. Growing up I'd heard, you know, never to do heroin. Like the warnings were everywhere and I was scared—do heroin, get hooked. No one ever mentioned crystal to me. I'd done a little coke, Ecstasy, whatever—I could take it or leave it. But early that morning, when I took those off-white crushed shards up that blue, cut plastic straw—well, my whole world pretty much changed after that. There was a feeling like—my God, this is what I've been missing my entire life. It completed me. I felt whole for the first time.

"I guess I've pretty much spent the last four years chasing that first high. I

wanted desperately to feel that wholeness again. It was like, I don't know, like everything else faded out. All my dreams, my hopes, ambitions, relationships—they all fell away as I took more and more crystal meth up my nose. I dropped out of college twice, my parents kicked me out, and, basically, my life unraveled. I broke into their house—I would steal checks from my father and write them out to myself to pay for my habit. When I had a job at a coffee shop, I stole hundreds of dollars from the register. Eventually I got arrested for a possession charge. My little brother and sister watched me get carted away in handcuffs. When my then 7-year-

*"THERE WAS A FEELING LIKE—MY GOD, THIS IS WHAT I'VE BEEN MISSING MY ENTIRE LIFE. IT COMPLETED ME. I FELT WHOLE FOR THE FIRST TIME."*

old brother tried to protect me, running to grab me from the armed policemen, they screamed for him to "get back." His small body crumpled on the asphalt and he burst into body-shaking tears, sobbing and gasping for breath.

"Then there were the treatment centers, two in Northern California, one in Manhattan, and one in Los Angeles. I've spent the last three years in and out of 12-step programs. Throughout all of it the underlying craving never really left me. And that was accompanied by the illusion that, the next time, things would be different—I'd be able to handle it better. I didn't want to keep hurting people. I didn't want to

keep hurting myself. A girlfriend of mine once said to me, "I don't understand, why don't you just stop?"

"I couldn't think of an answer. The fact was, I couldn't 'just stop.' That sounds like a cop-out, but it's the truth. It's like I'm being held captive by some insatiable monster that will not let me stop. All my values, all my beliefs, everything I care about, they all go away the moment I get high. There is a sort of insanity that takes over. I convince myself and believe very strongly that this time, this time, it will be different."

Today father and son travel the country promoting a jointly written book called, *High: Everything You Want To Know About Drugs, Alcohol and Addiction*, and offering seminars to share the insights of their joint and painful journey.

Surveying the journey through his son's addiction, David Sheff has reached many useful conclusions.

Drug addiction, he says, deserves and demands the same level of public focus and scientific attention as the campaign against cancer. Promising medications for improving rehab outcomes are still awaiting testing and FDA approval. An American Addiction Society—like the American Cancer Society—is sorely needed, and insurance coverage for addiction treatment should be mandated for all insurance companies.

And finally, concludes Sheff, prevention must be elevated to the highest priority.

"We could save billions of dollars and untold lives," he writes, "if we intervened early and prevented progress of addiction and its effects..." ☾

*David and Nic Sheff will appear in conversation with the Sonoma Speaker Series on Monday, February 3, at Hanna Boys Center, 17000 Arnold Drive, Sonoma. VIP reception at 5:30. Program begins at 7 p.m. For tickets go to [sonomaspeakerseries.com](http://sonomaspeakerseries.com).*