

A teacher shot heroin 500 days in a row. His passion for theater helped him get clean.

[Domenica Bongiovanni](#) Updated 11:09 a.m. ET March 2, 2018

For a long time, Justin Wade would only tell the kids he taught at the [Young Actors Theatre](#) that he was a hard case.

He'd been addicted to drugs and was homeless for a time, he said. He had a tough past but had moved on.

Then he met Jake Meyer. As a senior at [Herron High School](#), Jake had started shooting heroin. It dulled his agony over the drowning death of his 2-year-old brother, Max. Jake was 12 when he found the toddler's body in the family's backyard pool.

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Their sister, Carson Meyer, had joined YAT to cope with her own grief. She convinced Jake to participate. Wade asked Jake to build sets and take care of odd jobs.

Working together, the teacher and student learned what they had in common. Jake was vulnerable with Wade about his pain. And Wade told Jake that he knew he was using, even though Jake was telling people he

was clean.

"You can't really lie to (Wade), is the thing," Carson Meyer said. "He can spot it, and he calls you out in a very loving way."

That's because for a long time, Wade had lied to himself. For 10 years, during his 20s and early 30s, heroin and methadone wrapped themselves like a gauze around his dreams, keeping him from fully grasping his talent for teaching and theater.

Now off drugs for 11 years — he's careful to say he's a recovering addict — Wade leads YAT, one of the country's most inventive theater programs. Under his almost 13-year tenure, the program has grown from about 100 students to more than 1,500 per year.

Over the past several years, the teacher has let out his story a little at a time until recently, when he has been frank with YAT's older students.

"Nothing ever in my life will be as hard, and I just had to talk about it," Wade says.

'Never felt so numb or free'

The first time Wade shot heroin, a friend slipped the needle through the skin on his right arm at a house at 16th and Talbott streets. The then-22-year-old had been ensconced in a group of artists and homeless people who hung around the former location of the [Herron School of Art and Design](#) and recited quotes nightly from a thick book Wade carried around. Artists they looked up to used the drug, so they wanted it, too.

"The first thing I said was, 'I'm going to do this every day for the rest of my life' immediately after feeling the high because I had never felt so, like,

numb or free," Wade said.

That he threw up all night didn't matter. Neither did time or money. Heroin blanketed Wade's pain and fear, imparting a warm, hours-long calm. Even the shadows of the dark, early-morning Downtown streets didn't faze him.

"When you're on heroin, you could be walking in shoes with holes in them and having nothing, and you're content," Wade said.

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Wade put heroin aside, briefly, to attend the [American Musical and Dramatic Academy](#) in 1997 in New York. But, after about three months, he left. When he stepped off the plane, his then-girlfriend was waiting with heroin.

"I think I did (heroin) 500 days in a row before I ran out of money and even realized I had a habit. ... I didn't even notice the downward descent," Wade said.

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Paychecks from odd jobs, including construction, restaurants, temp agencies and teaching, vanished within a day or two. To make money, Wade and his friends dressed as students and stole books from colleges to sell them back.

Wade was fired from his special education assistant job at an elementary school after just two months for excessive absences.

Although Wade said he never shot up at school, he frequently missed work. While there, he had gotten close with a young boy whose parents had died in a fire. The boy had refused to say much until Wade started working with him.

"When are you going to get your sins off you, Mr. Wade?" the little boy would ask, teasing him about the "freedom" tattoo on his neck.

When Wade left the school on his last day, the boy became visibly upset.

Wade made it to his light blue Plymouth Reliant before erupting into sobs and punching his car. The memory still rattles him.

"That's the hardest thing to talk about of anything that I've been through is admitting that I had drug problems while I was working for schools," Wade said.

'From a wanna-be to ... a little bit of a menace'

The Wade who tells his story now barely recognizes the old version of himself. He's sitting on a bench outside the Indianapolis Central Library, wearing black-framed glasses and dressed in suede boots, jeans and a blazer. He has a wife, a daughter and twins on the way.

Indianapolis Mayor Joe Hogsett has appointed him as a member of the [Cultural Investment Advisory Council](#). Wade was selected as a member of Class XLII of the [Stanley K. Lacy Executive Leadership Series](#), which connects and educates civic leaders.

At YAT, he and a group of educators practice "self-empowerment theater." They coach students to write their own scripts, voice how they will overcome obstacles and spend time on stage.

"Self-empowerment theater is a reaction to everything I've been through in my life," Wade said.



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Actors in the Young Actors Theatre take instruction from Executive Director Justin Wade, left, during a rehearsal, which included self empowerment theater, at the Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields on Dec. 2, 2017. (Photo: Michelle Pemberton/IndyStar)

Wade, 43, speaks at a moderate pace in an accent rooted in Indianapolis but with vowels that sometimes pull toward a Southern drawl. Collected in his speech patterns are the places his family has lived — Tucson, Ariz.; Eau Claire and Milwaukee, Wis.; Jacksonville and Anniston, Ala.; Virginia Beach and Norfolk, Va.

In Norfolk, he had found his crowd at the beach, and he and his friends there fought and smoked cigarettes. When Wade was in seventh grade, the family moved to Indianapolis, and he was angry about starting a new life halfway across the country. He rebelled with a new crowd at [Belzer Middle School](#) and [Lawrence Central High School](#).

Subcultures — punk, hippies, hip hop — called out to Wade, and he tried on their philosophies and drugs like clothes. He became a die-hard fan of The Dead Milkmen, after seeing a tape that belonged to a lifeguard who had a bowl skater haircut and tattoos that he idolized. Wade ate up Jack Kerouac's "On the Road" and Terence McKenna's "Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge: A Radical History of Plants, Drugs and Human Evolution."

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He tried nitrous-oxide balloons at Grateful Dead shows and became smitten with the idea of living off the grid, which he flirted with after high school when he briefly hopped freight trains. Wade became part of a rap group he named Civil Disobedience — a callback to Henry David Thoreau's essays on the topic that Wade turned into a tattoo across his stomach.

In real life, Wade wallowed in fear. Fear of being the new kid at school every time his family moved. Fear of not having courage to speak up. Fear that manifested itself in the pills, cocaine, pot and alcohol that he hid from his parents, under cover of a squeaky-clean car and Visine drops that cleared the redness from his eyes.

"I started looking up to bad kids, but they could see in me that I was like this, kind of, upper-middle class, well-read kid. ... But, then, the drugs are real. All the sudden, you go from a wanna-be to kind of like a little bit of a menace."

'No bell to ring'

As a child, Wade had shown a knack for acting in school plays. The rush of performance, along with his slapstick and confident humor, was emotional

ventilation for him. His dad, Joe, remembers his young son performing in a country medley in Alabama with no inhibitions.

"When it came to Justin's solo, everybody ... had their eyes on him because he kind of had a comical element to his style, and the kids loved it," Joe Wade said.

"That's when we said, 'Whoa, Justin's got some talent.' "

Wade is the oldest of four, born to Joe and Char Wade, who both grew up in Indiana. Joe was an administrator in the Lawrence Township school system. Char worked different jobs, before opening her own advertising company.

When the family moved to Indianapolis, Char spotted a photo of the Young Actors Theatre in The Indianapolis Star and signed her son up. Every Saturday, Wade joined his teacher, Charlotte Kaufman, outside the Athenaeum. He drank in her knowledge along with drags off the Virginia Slim cigarettes she let him bum off her.

Kaufman, an actress who once worked in New York, founded the not-for-profit YAT in 1976. Every day, she wore a dress to work. Between sips of black coffee, she would spin off tangents about method acting, art and life in her raspy voice.



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Reese Stephenson, center, reads his lines during a rehearsal, which included self empowerment theater, at the Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields on Dec. 2, 2017. (Photo: Michelle Pemberton/IndyStar)

"You've got this older theater teacher that's very, like, philosophical and deep, and she's just spitting passion," Wade said. "And there's no bell to ring ... there's a lot of freedom of expression kind of happening, and it was very addicting to be around."

From then on, the only time Wade spent time away from YAT was when he experienced his darkest moments wandering the streets. Kaufman gave her students her trust, and with it, a pass to explore the Downtown landscape of the late 1980s and early '90s.

Kaufman, [who died in 2008](#), was among the first to see Wade's teaching talent. She called him back to help, after he was no longer a student in the

program. Shortly after he finished high school, Wade began assistant directing. He was always the cool teacher — the one who wore a black leather coat, skinny tie and Ramones buttons.

"Charlotte ... had to have known that he was on drugs and yet she saw good in him, and didn't judge him for it," Joe Wade said.

"He had something to live for, obviously, and he never let that go as bad as it got."

'We don't want you to escape us'

As Wade's heroin addiction became more obvious, his brother, Corey, confirmed to Joe and Char Wade what they had already been suspecting.

His parents paid for treatment, but Wade always escaped the overnight centers. He never signed himself out, because that meant admitting that he was giving up on getting clean.

"The sickness would come on. It would come on so deep that I'd start using all my change, you know, to be on the payphone," Wade said. "I'm ... calling dealers trying to get fronts, and it's nighttime, and I'm like, 'I can't handle this, I can't take this.' I'd find a way for somebody to meet me."

Joe Wade lost count of the number of times he took Justin to a detox facility.

"He knew he was our son; he knew we loved him," Joe Wade said. "Our decision was to stay in his life, so you have to see us. We don't want you to escape us. Kind of like, we want to be in your face a little bit."



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Justin Wade got this tattoo of St. Michael defeating demons to remind him to defeat temptation from moment to moment. The tattoo is just beneath the scars from where he shot heroin. Wade is the executive director of Young Actors Theatre. (Photo: Domenica Bongiovanni/IndyStar)

Over time, Justin started slowly substituting in methadone. The painkiller deflects the high from heroin and keeps an addict from experiencing withdrawal. Eventually, Wade moved solely onto methadone.

Wade cycled among the methadone clinic near the Central Library, detox centers, transitional housing and Narcotics Anonymous meetings at Central Christian Church, Talbot House and the Harbor Light Center.

Sometimes, when he failed the required urine test or owed too much money, he'd end up on the streets. When he was high, he'd devour Charles Bukowski's underground urban poetry and Hubert Selby Jr.'s "Last Exit to Brooklyn" under streetlights.

Finally quitting methadone catapulted him into extreme sickness for months. Severe constipation, followed by a loosening of the bowels. Profuse sweating. Chills. Inability to eat. Shaking and sniffing. Constant discomfort. No sleep for days.

The day Wade fought through the worst of withdrawal, he clutched a half-gallon bottle of vodka in one hand and his phone in the other. Sitting in his top-floor apartment at 14th and Delaware streets, the then-32-year-old screamed through the receiver to his mom. Did she have leftover prescription pills? Anything at all?



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Actors in the Young Actors Theatre take instruction from Executive Director Justin Wade, right, during a rehearsal which included Self Empowerment Theatre held at the Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields on Dec. 12, 2017. *(Photo: Michelle Pemberton/IndyStar)*

"If you care about me, you'll bring them," he told her.

No, you can make it through this, she said. You're almost there.

Through it all, Young Actors Theatre was his anchor. While Wade was teaching, he had a dream of making the program into something bigger.

"The Young Actors thing kind of kept Justin hopeful," said Saad Yazid, who was Wade's sponsor as he fought his addiction. "He was working at that during the time, and it (was) really rough for him, but he continued to hang on.

"Young Actors kind of helped save his life, really."

'If I have this idea ... Justin will make it happen'

Three years before Charlotte Kaufman died, her son Richard and daughter-in-law Cathie handed over YAT to Wade, when it became too much for their mother to handle. At the time, in 2005, the program had three shows per year with 30 to 40 kids in each.

The job was a dream for Wade, who had transitioned from heroin to methadone by that time. Having grown up with a father who had strong, research-based views on education, Wade had formed ideas on his own — namely, that theater can develop personal strength, even for young people who didn't necessarily want careers as actors.

Around 2003, [Carson Meyer joined the program as a way of coping with her 2-year-old brother's drowning death](#). Wade became a mentor and the person she turned to when her older brother, Jake Meyer, struggled with his own heroin addiction.



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Carson Meyer played the lead in "Go Ask Alice" at Young Actors Theatre, while she was a senior at Herron High School. *(Photo: File photo by Frank Espich/The Star)*

"When you're in the program, like growing up in it, you feel a lot of ownership over it," said Meyer, now 22. "You feel like, if I have this idea of something I want to do, and I have a reason for doing it, Justin will make it happen."

Jake Meyer [wanted to overcome his addiction](#) and spent stints in rehab. But it wasn't enough. In early 2013, he died from an overdose at 21. Wade was in the upstairs lobby of the Athenaeum, when Meyer's father called with the news.

"I hit the ground behind the bar and cried," Wade said. "Jake was a beautiful kid, man. He had charisma ... there was something special about him."

After Jake's death, Carson said she felt like an open wound. For the first few weeks after her brother's death, Wade called or texted her. *Did you eat today?* he'd ask.

In 2014, Meyer took the lead role in YAT's production of "Go Ask Alice," a play that follows a teenage girl's descent into drug addiction. Proceeds from the sell-out crowds went toward her tuition at the American Musical and Dramatic Academy in Los Angeles, from which she graduated in 2017.

She now works as an actor in L.A. and tackles side jobs to help her pay the bills. Wade, she said, taught her how to balance that.

He "really helped me find that foundation and find the path to get there," Meyer said. "I'm always going to be so grateful for him for that."

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'Once you voice something ... it starts to come true'

Wade calls the days shortly after recovery one of the brightest periods of his life.

"I was, like, laughing myself to sleep at night, because I was so amazed to be around infinite possibilities," he said.

Waiting for him on the other side of the addiction was his lifelong dream and a fresh clarity. Since he had taken over YAT in 2005, Wade had been working with his sister, Catherine, to build what became the concept of self-empowerment theater.

The program began to crystallize when his now-wife, Georgeanna Smith Wade, along with theater educators Julie Mauro and Mikael Burke, came on board. Tim Miannan, a parent who later became YAT's board president, guided Wade into growing the organization from a side-gig into supporting fulltime teaching positions.

YAT students create and perform for youth audiences. Social-issues plays like "The Court vs. Bullying" forced kids on stage and in the audience to play out the consequences of a simple cruel action. Another show imaginatively weaved the concept of self-confidence into the traditional fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty.

Saige Broadwater, a senior at Decatur Central High School, said students each choose goals during warm-ups before performances. They then chant together, "I would like to have a breakthrough."

"Once you voice something, like speak it into existence, once you say something that you believe, it starts to come true. I definitely believe that voicing that and putting that out there, just putting that energy into the

air was beneficial for me," said Broadwater, who is the president of the YAT Teen Advisory Board.

She'd like to go into sports broadcasting, and YAT has shown her how to express and present herself.

"I used to never smile, especially now because I have braces, and (Wade) taught me to smile, which is a huge thing for being a broadcaster," she said.



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Actors in the Young Actors Theatre interact during a rehearsal, which included self empowerment theater, at the Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields on Dec. 2, 2017. (Photo: Michelle Pemberton/IndyStar)

'I want to be associated with the humble servant'

Smith Wade, who joined YAT and the now-defunct Project School in 2010 as Wade's teaching assistant, remembered being amused by her boss's

passion for teaching and his "Justinisms."

"I started to write down funny things that he would say because he has such a distinctive way of speaking," said Smith Wade, now YAT's artistic director.

The quote Wade is famous for at YAT juxtaposes his sense of discipline and concern for students.



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Justin Wade and his wife Georgeanna Smith Wade co-starred in "Danny and the Deep Blue Sea" in 2014. (Photo: File photo by Charlie Nye/The Star)

"Now everybody needs to sit up and pay attention and do this," Smith Wade mimicked in an intense voice. Then she softened her tone. "Now we love you all very much, and we believe in each and every single one of you, and we're going to have a great show!"

As the duo taught together, their friendship grew. Wade started to tell her, "I like you for real." The two began dating in 2013. The relationship focused Wade. He stopped drinking alcohol, a habit he had before he started using heroin.

Wade surprised his future wife with a proposal on Monument Circle that included a flash mob of YAT students and others dancing to [Beyonce's "XO."](#) The couple married in 2014, the same year they co-starred in "Danny and the Deep Blue Sea."

"I found in Justin a true partner," said Smith Wade. "We have the same values and the same priorities and that has helped me even sharpen my priorities."

Their first child, Cosette, was born in 2015. She was named after the character in "Les Miserables," whose adoption by former convict Jean Valjean helps him change. Her parents wanted the name to remind them of that story of redemption — the idea that bad decisions in the past don't have to determine a person's life.

In July, the couple are expecting twins.

Wade's ever-present intensity is now focused on his voracious reading habit, gym workouts and his yard. He painstakingly trims the lawn at their home in Fishers — a task Smith Wade said he grumbles about though she suspects he secretly enjoys it.



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Justin Wade's tattoo is a callback to the Stoics of ancient Greece, who practiced discipline and controlling their reactions. It reminds him to do the same and to carefully listen to all points of view. (Photo: Domenica Bongiovanni/IndyStar)

They strive to live out the honesty and life principles they teach. As proof, Wade offered his cell phone to look through. No secrets here, he said.

"It's funny when I hear stories about what Justin was involved in, because his life is so different right now," Smith Wade said. "So in terms of people who are at high risk of relapsing, I don't think Justin is."

A few months ago, Wade had "STOIC" tattooed on the inside of his left middle finger. Stoicism, which was founded in Athens in the third century B.C., focuses on controlling your reactions and using obstacles as opportunities to improve. The tattoo reminds him to be quiet and listen to every viewpoint.

On his right arm, beneath scars from where heroin needles punctured his veins, is a tattoo of St. Michael fighting demons. It reminds Wade to defeat temptation.

"I want to be associated with the humble servant," Wade said. "I look at the police officer, or the firefighter, or the plumber or the nonprofit leader and I say, all of these people are doing things that have given us this great life and this great society. And I want to be a part of that kind of every man, every human type of feel."

"It makes me feel so much more grounded. It makes me feel so much more OK."

Call IndyStar reporter Domenica Bongiovanni at 317-444-7339. Follow her on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

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