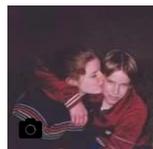
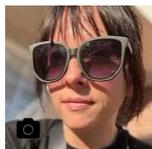
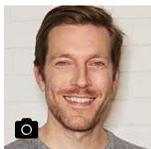
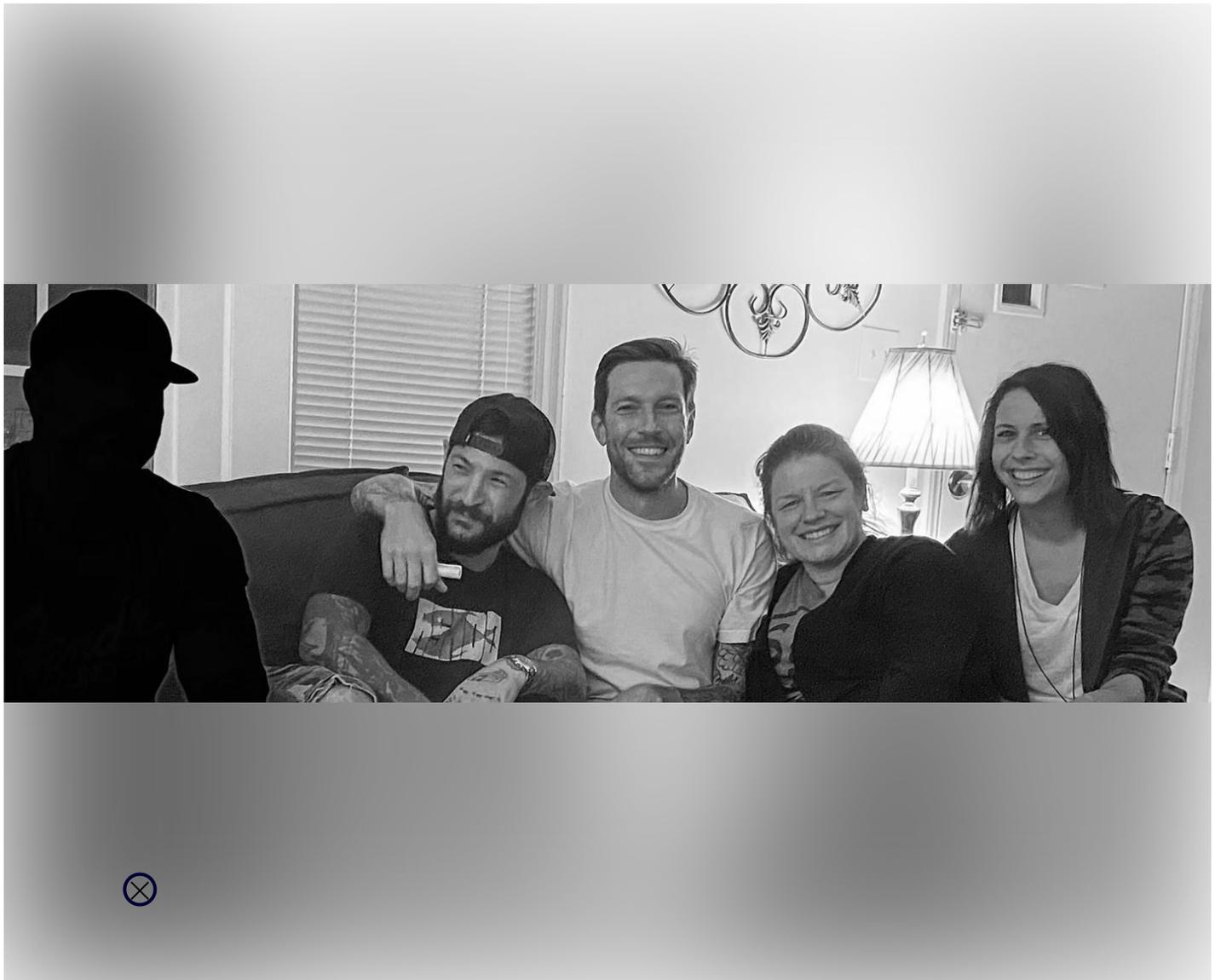


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# The ones still standing: Marietta natives chronicle addiction experience in memoir

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Courtesy of Brian Rehn

From left: Ryan Bernstein, Brian Rehn, Brooke Graham and Ashley Mercurio. In this photo, the co-authors of “Young Firecrackers” sit together.

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Brian Rehn has lost 60 friends to drug addiction. At 42 years old, he has attended far more funerals than weddings.

“It’s weird to be the ones still left standing,” he said. “A lot of our lifelong friends have died.”

Rehn and four of his close friends, all Marietta natives, worked together to co-author a new memoir, “Young Firecrackers.” The book tells their stories living with addiction in the northern Atlanta suburbs, an area sometimes called the “heroin triangle,” during the 1990s, and how the addiction and loss they experienced have followed them into adulthood.

In 2018, A&E’s documentary “Intervention” aired an eight-episode series titled “The Heroin Triangle.” The series followed drug addicts in Marietta, Powder Springs and Atlanta and painted a disturbing portrait of our suburbs awash in drugs.



Released in April, “Young Firecrackers” tells the story of Brian Rehn, Ryan Bernstein, Andrew Theriot, Ashley Mercurio and Brooke Graham, and sheds light on the horrors of drug addiction.

## Growing up

Graduates of Pope High School in east Cobb, the co-authors have known one another since age 14. Though they split up for college, their friendship remains strong today. For Rehn and his co-authors, they first had a friend die from drugs at 19.

“It hit our group really hard and shook the Marietta area,” Rehn said.

Rehn said that during the throes of the opioid epidemic, the community “turned a blind eye” to its drug problem.

“You can’t act like it’s not happening,” he said. “It was the last thing anyone wanted to address. No one wanted to look at themselves in the mirror and see what’s actually happening in the area, and an avalanche of hundreds of lives lost to drugs came from that.”

## Drug dependency

Each co-author struggled with addiction — not only with loved ones, but with themselves. The friends became addicted to intravenous drugs, which Rehn called a “big line to cross” with drug use. They are now in recovery, but Rehn said recovery and being sober are not synonymous.

“Getting sober is not enough,” Rehn said. “Who cares if you’re not on drugs unless you’re changing your life, changing how you treat people and making better decisions.”

Some of Rehn’s darkest moments were when he was sober in his 20s.

“Sobriety doesn’t fix everything, it’s what happens after that changes you,” Rehn said.

Rehn said that the group's recovery journeys inspired the first line he wrote for the memoir — "If you're not dead, pick yourself up."

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"We want people to read our struggles," he said. "The things they don't want to look at are the things that made us stronger."

For Rehn, the biggest problem with how people address drug addicts is blaming doctors, parents, everyone but the addict themselves for their actions.

"It is 99% the addicts fault," Rehn said. "There is no excuse to devastate your own life and the lives of everyone else involved."

## Speaking up

Rehn said that a common misconception of addiction is that you can raise a child to avoid it.

"You can move, have money and send your kids to the best schools — but it won't matter," Rehn said. "It matters about the decisions you make and who you surround yourself with. The perfect storm or group of people or person they date can send them on an inescapable trajectory."

Rehn said he had planned to write a book sharing friends' stories with drug addiction for over a decade before publication. He first mentioned it to Brian Cove, a close friend, at Cove's bachelor party.

Just a few years later, Cove died from an overdose. Rehn said that was his motivation to start writing.

“I took it as a sign to not wait any longer,” Rehn said.

The memoir is told from five perspectives, each with a unique focus and struggle. Rehn said their goal was to show readers how different the paths of addiction can be.

“Not everyone relates to every chapter, but there’s a chapter everyone can relate to,” Rehn said.

After more than 10 arrests and more than 30 visits to rehabilitation centers, Rehn has come out of his battle with drug addiction. Rehn stressed that drug addiction can affect anyone, and doesn’t have a specific look or zip code.

“A majority of problems start with pills from doctors, because they don’t feel as bad as street drugs,” Rehn said. “It’s no different from a doctor than a drug dealer from ‘The Bluff’ in downtown Atlanta. People blacklist the heroin user on the street, but praise the guy hooked on heroin with a job and family. It’s all the same.”

Young Firecrackers can be purchased on Amazon. More information about the memoir is available at [youngfirecrackers.com](http://youngfirecrackers.com).

If you or a loved one are battling drug addiction, contact the crisis hotline at 988.