

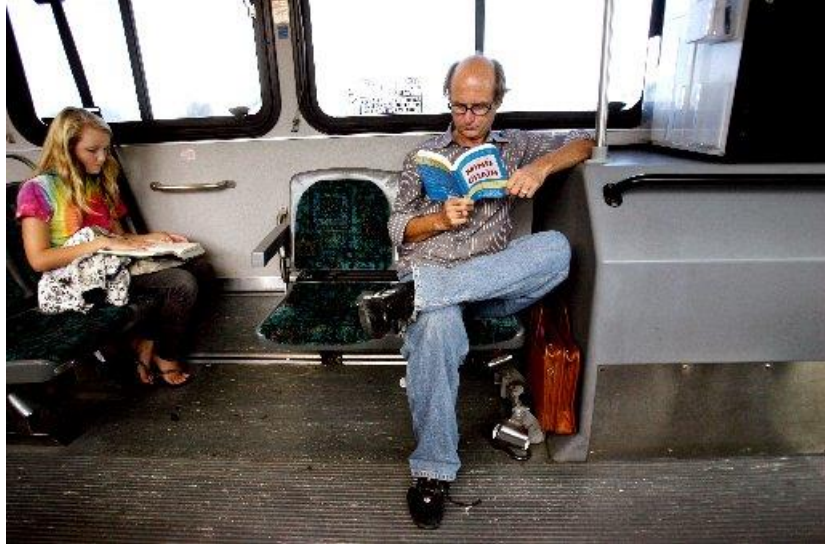
# THE PALM BEACH POST

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# THE RECOVERY OF AGUSTIN CASTELLANOS

He was a respected neurologist, who also happened to be taking 50 painkillers a day.

Coming clean would mean losing his livelihood -- but regaining his life.

Bottom came at 4 a.m. in jagged non sequiturs. His mind, still scrambled from an acute overdose and a night of barbiturate-fueled rage, darted between extreme scenarios.

One second, he dreaded facing his wife and kids. The next, he craved sobriety. The very next, he craved more drugs.

When he came to, Gus Castellanos found himself strapped to a hospital bed in the intensive care unit at Jupiter Medical Center. That bed was the last place he ever expected to be.

In the meticulously crafted script of his life, Agustin Castellanos was not a junkie fit to be tied. He was a respected neurologist. In fact, he was the head of the sleep disorder clinic at that very hospital. He was an honored son in a family of physicians, a doctor from a long line of doctors, a doctor like his father and his grandfather, both considered to be eminent in their field. He was a father, a husband, a brother.

But on June 10, 2004, the night of his overdose, he was just one thing: a desperate addict on the brink of death. His wife found him convulsing on the floor of their spacious Tequesta home. He had collapsed from the effects of Fiorinal with codeine, a powerful narcotic pain medication and muscle relaxant.

He hadn't meant to overdose. He had intended to do quite the opposite. He had self-prescribed the medication as a discreet way of weaning himself off his drugs of choice, hydrocodone-based painkillers such as Vicodin and Lortab. But it didn't work. Instead, he wound up in an ambulance barreling toward Jupiter Medical, where, as one young hospital worker recounted to him a couple of days later, he nearly ripped up the ER, fighting off nurses as they tried to draw his blood. Thus, the bed straps.

Things might have turned out differently had Castellanos been able to glimpse the staggering realities that lay ahead: He would face a criminal investigation in a high-profile, \$9.9 million prescription fraud case, federal charges for conspiracy to commit health-care fraud, prison time, the loss of his medical license and his thriving Palm Beach Gardens practice.

But in that empty, pre-dawn interval in the ICU, Castellanos, distinguished neurologist and neuro-oncologist whose career included resident rotations through Emory University Hospital in Atlanta, Georgetown University Hospital in Washington, D.C., and the prestigious M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, a pioneering practice in sleep medicine, and a clinic for the poor in Jupiter, made the most critical decision of his life. He decided to get sober.

The decision was reinforced the moment his wife of 23 years swept into the ICU room and fired a hard look at him.

"It was this look of fear, terror, anger, bewilderment, all those really bad things," says Castellanos on a recent afternoon. "And she said, 'You'd better come clean.' When she said that, I knew I had to surrender. I let go."

## **'One eternal mind'**

He tells the story now, ensconced in a new and markedly different life. At 53, he is seated at a computer in a modest home office in Tequesta, where he and a business associate have launched a motivational/life-coaching endeavor, 18mind.com. (It stands for "one eternal mind" -- the 8 being the symbol for eternity.)

Just weeks ago, Castellanos was released from a West Palm Beach halfway house, where five mornings a week he took a bus to his job at the Web site. He was allowed to go home two days a week. At the end of this week, he will be permitted to drive once again -- for now, he rides a bike.

He and his business partner, Clint Baxley, embrace a novel philosophy that flips the script on the traditional affirmation-driven self-help culture. Instead of replaying thoughts, like "I should have more money," or "I should be thin," they ask their clients to flip the thought: I should not have more money. I should not be thin.

Doing this, they believe, releases the tension attached to one's mental obsessions.

"What's the point of repeating things you don't really believe? Doing the opposite allows your body to be more in tune with the moment. When that happens, you're in a better mood," says Castellanos, a quietly disarming man with the understated manner of a scientist. "Neurologically, it makes sense. I could tell you this flipping technique affects your subconscious, your autonomic nerve system, your hypothalamus -- I could tell you all kinds of scientific stuff. But what it means is that it stops the stressful thought."

## **Drug abuse began in teens**

In his previous life, Castellanos never would have allowed himself to experience such epiphanies. He was a free man, a man with the time and money to explore the universe at his whim. But for all his success and privilege, he lived in a kind of prison. His addiction, a condition that began lightly in adolescence and worsened through the decades, became his solitary confinement.

"I started drinking and smoking when I was 13, experimenting. By the time I got to high school, I would drink to get my courage up for the dances and parties," says Castellanos, born in Cuba and raised in Miami. "But then the year I turned 18, they lowered the drinking age to 18. I was a deejay and it was the whole disco boom, cocaine and Quaaludes, this and that. I did the whole party scene."

He says he put aside the party scene to concentrate on med school and resident rotations, and start a family with his wife, Bessy. But as he began to build his practice some years later, he says he would often drink and reach for pain meds to ease his stress. Toward the end of 2000, the painkillers had become a habit.

"It was just access, I guess. We'd get samples of all these pills, so I started taking them. It was like candy in a candy store. My disease got a little worse," says Castellanos. "And then I ran into the pharmacist."

The pharmacist was Joseph Sutura, owner of The Medicine Shoppe franchise next to Castellanos' practice on Burns Road in Palm Beach Gardens. The federal indictment describes Sutura as the ring leader of the prescription fraud operation. It says he used Castellanos and two others, a psychiatrist and a chiropractor, to substantiate prescriptions for fraudulent claims to private insurance companies.

The pharmacist got rich in the process, raking in four homes, several IRA and life insurance accounts, commercial real estate, a Steinway piano, a diamond-studded Rolex and more than \$90,000 in electronic goods, according to the indictment.

Castellanos got drugs. In exchange for prescriptions, he'd get all the hydrocodone products he desired. And he desired 50 pills a day, at 10 mg each. He didn't request the more popular Oxycontin because he says he didn't want to attract attention.

"But then I'm taking, what, 1,500 pills a month," says Castellanos, noting his clouded reasoning.

### **Taking the edge off**

Despite the amount of drugs, he managed to maintain a semblance of normalcy in his practice, he says.

"I'd be groggy off and on. I only took enough during the day to take the edge off the withdrawal. It was toward the end of the day that I started doing them more and more, late into the evening," says Castellanos, who was able to pull off the routine because his practice didn't generate many evening or overnight calls.

Did he ever fear he might be overmedicating his patients?

"I would never volunteer to prescribe unnecessary quantities of medication. Besides, my nurse and assistant were very straight-up people who reviewed my patient prescriptions closely," he says.

Castellanos says he was unaware that his arrangement with the pharmacist was part of a larger ring.

"I didn't know any of this. I wasn't paying a whole lot of attention because I was getting my drugs and I was getting more and more messed up," he says. "By the beginning of 2004, two years into this thing, I was a real mess. I had trouble functioning, although I was still able to make it through my day at work."

By early June 2004, Castellanos knew he couldn't go on.

"I kept saying to myself, 'Something's got to go stop,' " says Castellanos, who had attempted to wean himself off the drugs many times before.

This time, he tried to do it by taking methadone for a couple of days.

"Immediately, I knew that wasn't going to work," he says.

So he switched to Fiorinal, a compound of various chemicals, including caffeine and codeine.

"I only took a handful that first night, and the next morning I just couldn't function," he says. "I don't even think I saw a patient that day. I remember coming back home, and that's the last thing I remember."

### **Bessy felt manipulated**

When Bessy Castellanos found her husband convulsing on the floor that night, she says just one thought came to mind.

"I looked at him and thought to myself, 'I'm done. This is it,' " she says.

She says she felt deceived, manipulated. She knew her husband had a drug problem, but she says she didn't know the depths of it. His was not one of those in-your-face addicts, she says. He wasn't a jittery crack head or a crystal meth-addicted tweaker. He wasn't the loud drunk guy at the party. He slept. He tuned out.

Bessy says he promised he would quit the painkillers -- and, for a while, she believed him. But that night she realized he had lied. An accomplished tennis player on the USTA circuit and a devoted mother of two grown children, she had embarked on a kind of spiritual journey some years earlier, hoping to find a measure of clarity regarding her life and her marriage. She says she had tried her best to involve her husband in her practice of yoga and meditation.

"But Gus fought it. I knew for a long time that I had to take care of myself. I felt I was alone in my marriage. We lived in the same house, but we weren't together," she says.

They had met at Menage, a popular disco in 1970s Miami. Castellanos remembers the first time he caught sight of Bessy.

"I looked across the bar and I saw her, and I thought to myself, 'I'm gonna meet this girl tonight.' I went up and met her at the end of the night, and we've been together since," he says.

"I'll never forget her face, the way she looked at me."

In the nearly three decades he's known his wife, Castellanos says there have been two times he has felt her look burn into his memory. The first time was the night they met. The second time was the morning she came into that ICU room. Some time later, a caravan of relatives and doctors would descend upon him in a bedside intervention. But by then it wasn't necessary, he says. By then, Bessy had given him the look.

### **Addicts are powerless**

After a few more days at the hospital, Castellanos headed to Sierra Tucson in Arizona, a high-end recovery facility where notables like Whitney Houston, Heather Locklear and Mark Foley went to rehab. Castellanos spent 30 days there, immersed in the center's holistic approach to recovery and meditating each day on the first of the 12 Steps:

"We admitted we were powerless over our addiction, that our lives had become unmanageable."

There, he learned to connect with his family on a more honest level. His family, in turn, got an education on addiction and recovery. His son, Agustin, 22, and daughter, Natalie, 23, have been tremendously supportive, say he and his wife.

Before heading to rehab, Castellanos says he informed the Florida Board of Medicine and the state's Professionals Resource Network about his overdose and his plans for recovery. That started an internal process of monitoring and therapeutic support, both of which Castellanos says he welcomed, as he felt he was being treated as an addict and not a criminal.

"I was fully accepting that I needed the help. But there was still this sense of self-centeredness on my part," he says. "I was scared of what was going to happen when I got back home. What would people say?"

### **Practicing yoga together**

When he did come home, clean and sober, he had little doubt he would return to his practice.

"When he came back, he felt he couldn't leave his patients. That's why he kept the practice, I think," says Bessy Castellanos, who still wasn't sure she wanted to allow her husband back into their home.

She did so at her daughter's request, she says. And one day, her husband surprised her.

"He says to me, 'Can I go to yoga with you?' " she recalls.

As they began to attend yoga classes together, they started to rediscover one another, she says.

A couple of months later, she remembered exactly why she had fallen in love with him in the first place. The realization came after Castellanos received a subpoena to testify before a federal grand jury in a drug case.

Already rooted in his recovery, Castellanos took it as an opportunity to tell his story in full detail to the feds. He didn't know the details of the case, nor that the main target was the pharmacist. In fact, he was convinced he was the one they wanted. And because he had chosen to live a life of honesty, he was intent on telling them everything about his addiction, whether or not they asked.

He says the federal prosecutors and investigators present kept asking about the pharmacist. He'd respond with detailed information about his own drug habit.

"I thought they wanted to talk about what I did. I guess I was overcompensating," he says.

"He convicted himself," says his wife.

But in watching him face up to his actions, regardless of the consequences, Bessy recognized something in her husband that stole her heart once again.

"It takes a lot of integrity to do what he did. It takes guts to know that something is going to hit big in the papers and stay in the community," says Bessy, "I just said, 'I stand behind you.' This is how I let Gus back in."

### **'My thinking cleared up'**

Between the yoga and his recovery support groups, Castellanos came to experience what it felt like to work in a clear-headed manner. As a result, he says, his business grew by 33 percent.

"I made more money in 2005, my first year clean, than I did in any other year of my entire practice," he says. "My thinking cleared up."

Castellanos was praised for his willingness to help the feds, and for being the first to cooperate with investigators. As a result, the pharmacist got 16 years in prison. But in the end, Castellanos was not spared of jail time. On Oct. 31, 2006, U.S. District Judge Daniel Hurley sentenced him to three years in federal prison for conspiracy to commit health-care fraud.

At the hearing, Castellanos made reference to the bizarre parallel that date has in his life. On Oct. 31, 1960, he arrived from Cuba with his mother and three siblings.

"My freedom was granted to me one Oct. 31 and then it was taken away on another Oct. 31," says Castellanos.

He spent the next three months in a 6-by-9-foot cell at the federal detention center in Miami, locked up for 15 or 16 hours a day.

"You learn to pray and surrender. I think that's where I really started to seriously surrender. Because I had nothing else to do," he says. "I kept repeating, 'God, I surrender. God, I surrender.' I didn't know what that meant. I just said it. And little by little, day by day, I got through."

One day in February 2007, he was taken by bus to Tallahassee, then to Atlanta, to a kind of transfer station. He spent one week in a cell, locked up for 23 hours a day. As he had done in Miami, Castellanos would try to meditate and do a modified yoga routine. Meanwhile, back in Tequesta, Bessy had taken a job as a sales associate at her favorite store, Saks Fifth Avenue, to help support the household. The job became part of a new life for her, one in which she not only works but also uses her love of fashion to volunteer at women empowerment charities.

### **Medical license gone**

Castellanos' final destination would be a federal correctional center in South Carolina, a more open, lower-security camp. Castellanos spent 14 months at the facility and must continue to serve three years probation.

He spent his time practicing yoga, working on his recovery, and reviewing the choices that led him to that particular place. He also tried to prepare himself for a future outside of medicine. During the time he was imprisoned, he surrendered his medical license. Doing so brought a great sense of relief, he says. Being a doctor was something he became because it seemed to be required of a Castellanos.

His grandfather, Agustin Wilfredo Castellanos, was a world-acclaimed pediatric cardiologist immortalized by the legendary Mexican muralist Diego Rivera in his Great Men of Cardiology mural in Mexico City. He was nominated twice for a Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1959 and 1960. Castellanos' father, also Agustin, made a distinguished career as a professor of cardiology at the University of Miami School of Medicine, where he is now chief of electrophysiology. And his brother, Daniel, is a respected psychiatrist in Miami.

"I came out of the womb and people were asking me, 'Which medical school are you going to? What kind of doctor are you going to be?' " says Castellanos, who admits he feels liberated to be out of medicine. "Maybe 10 years from now I'll look back on this and say, 'Man, why didn't all this happen to me 10 years earlier? Why did it take me so long to get out of medicine or get into rehab?'"

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