

While the waves crashed against the rocks beneath him, [Grant Stuard](#) readied himself for the fall. He was closer now, inches from the edge. He yanked the headphones from his ears and stared into the darkness.

More than anything, he didn't want it to hurt.

Everything he'd lived through — everything he'd tried to block out and bury for years — was finally catching up to him, smothering him, suffocating him, pushing him here, to the end of this pier past 2 a.m. one night in Galveston, Texas, gazing at the jagged rocks below, convinced if he jumped all his pain would vanish in an instant.

He'd always tried to be Superman, the star athlete and A student, all while secretly keeping a broken home together. But the older he got, the more his life fell apart.

He wasn't Superman. He was 20 years old, and he was slipping, becoming what he loathed most. He started skipping classes. Then meetings. Then practices. Coaches wanted to kick him off the team. A girlfriend called him out. "You're just like your dad," she told him, "and your brother and sister are gonna be just like you."

For weeks, he couldn't shake those words from his mind.

Just like my dad? Just like me?

So he jumped in his Mustang late one night and drove, cranking the volume on his speakers. He parked next to the pier. He deleted every social media account he had. Finally, he started walking toward the water.

“I just wanted to be gone,” he says now. “I wanted to erase myself.”

He scoped out the scene. He saw no one. Beneath him, the rocks jutted out into the Gulf.

He told himself it’d be over fast.

He peered over the edge, heart racing, hands trembling. He took out his headphones, scribbled in his notebook and envisioned the fall.

Then he heard something.

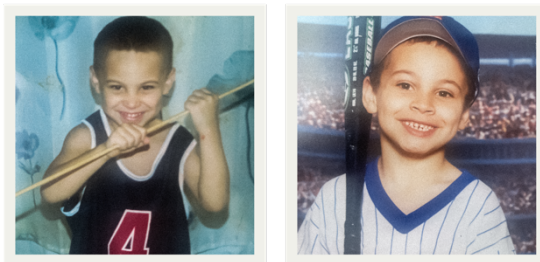
Before he tried to be Superman, Grant Stuard thought he was Spider-Man. Inside his family’s living room in Spring, just north of Houston, “he’d jump from the couch to the recliner and from the recliner to the couch all day long,” his mom says.

Laurel Montgomery’s oldest was a ball of endless energy. As a kid, Grant smashed into everything in sight, typically leaving a distinct trail of destruction: holes in the wall, holes in the furniture, holes everywhere.

“There’s no finesse to me and there never has been,” says the [Indianapolis Colts](#) linebacker and special teams star. “I don’t have the best coordination, per se, but I could always run and hit something.”

Dad wasn’t around much. Dawayne Stuard was arrested dozens of times between 1995 and 2020 and served multiple stints in prison. But when he was, he rarely missed a practice or game. A former semi-pro football player, he pushed Grant relentlessly. He screamed. He motivated. At times, he insulted.

“Are you OK with him talking to your son like that?” other parents would ask Laurel on the sideline. “I was so young I didn’t know any better,” she says.



(Courtesy Laurel Montgomery)

Tears and tantrums followed. Grant would throw his helmet if he didn't win every rep.

"My dad pushed me a lot harder than most kids would've been OK with," Grant says. But quickly, he came to crave the attention football provided. "It was the only place I felt seen."

Laurel was 16 when she first snorted cocaine, 17 when she lied about her age to land a job at a gentleman's club in the city, and 18 when she became a mom. She made \$300 on her first shift and \$800 on her second. She grew addicted to the money, then the drugs. Coke became Adderall. Adderall became Oxy. Oxy became heroin, meth. Twenty years went by. She lost control. She lost her job, then another, then another.

She'd vanish for weeks — no call, no warning, no nothing. When she did make it to one of her son's games, she'd sneak into the bathroom every half hour for another hit.

Laurel's mom, Janet, was around, filling in some of the gaps, but at home Grant carried most of the burden. He'd swipe the food stamps card from Laurel's purse so she couldn't sell it for drug money. He'd scrounge up dinner for his brother JoJo and sister Samaria, even if it was week-old Little Caesars pizza or cereal for the third night in a row. Sometimes, they'd have to settle for a bowl of uncooked Ramen noodles.

As he grew older, he started to hide his home life from everyone he knew. One lie became two. Two became 20. After football practices, Grant would ask his friends' parents to drop him off a few houses down so they wouldn't get suspicious and call Child Protective Services. When he missed school, he'd call and say he was sick. "The reality was I didn't have a way to get my brother to school," Grant says, "and I wasn't gonna leave him at home by himself."

He learned to drive at age 11, his head peeking over the steering wheel in his grandma's beige Chevy Cavalier. He'd drop JoJo and Samaria off each morning, and when a teacher would ask how they got there, Grant would shrug and say, "We rode the bus."

When friends would come over, they'd pepper him with questions.

"Where is your food?"

"Why are your floors so sticky?"

"Why are you wearing the same clothes you had on two days ago?"

By the time he was a teenager, he couldn't ignore it. The insults he heard on the playground. The stacks of bills on the nightstand. The residue he found on his mom's

bathroom counter. The racy calendars with her picture plastered on the cover that she'd stuffed into her closet, thinking no one would find.

Grant would grow furious, leaving Post-It notes over her face. "PLEASE STOP!" he'd write.

Finally, one night, after another overdose, Laurel came clean. "I'm a drug addict," she told her son from a hospital bed.

"I know, mom."

She was stunned. She thought she'd been hiding it.

"How did you know?" she asked.

"Mom, look at your arms."

She stared at the needle marks. The bruises. The scars.

"I feel like I neglected him as a person," Laurel says now, choking back tears. "I hate to say that, but that's how it was. I wanted to be a good mom. I just wasn't."

Dawayne Stuard was better at hiding his vices. He hid his infidelity from his wife — "Don't tell your mom," he'd warn Grant in private — and hid his pill addiction from his children.

But he couldn't hide from the police. Over the years, he was arrested on charges of theft, forgery, fraud, credit card abuse and organized criminal activity. He popped in and out of Grant's life for more than a decade, a fleeting figure whom his son slowly came to resent.

"As I got older, I was like, 'This is bullsh—,'" Grant says. "I was emotionally devastated."

On the football field, Grant yearned for his father's approval, the validation every young athlete chases when following in dad's footsteps. His games were the only times the family would all be together. He didn't want to disappoint.

"When I played well, it felt like I was being a good kid, like I was fulfilling my purpose," he says.

But he always wrestled with the hypocrisy staring him in the face. Dawayne was a licensed minister, a self-proclaimed Jesus freak, the dad who poured himself into his son's blossoming football career. He was also a serial criminal living a double life.

“There would be great moments with him, but they were few and far between,” Grant says.

So as a teenager, Grant made a vow to himself.

“I decided I wasn’t gonna smoke weed when everybody else was,” he says. “I wasn’t gonna get drunk when everybody else was. I didn’t wanna do anything they did, because everything they were doing wasn’t getting us out of the situation we were in.”

He threw himself into his schoolwork. (One of the few times he got a B, in fifth-grade English, he was left in tears. “I’m still pissed,” Grant says now. “I wrote a good paper.”) But when he’d walk through the door with his report card, anxious to show it off, no one would even ask to see it.

At Oak Ridge High he became a standout in football and track, known for the scraggly long hair that dangled past his shoulders and a motor that always revved at top speed. Colleges started to show interest. Yale called. Grant committed. Before his senior year, the coach who’d recruited him told him if he didn’t maintain an A average, the scholarship wouldn’t stand.

“No problem,” Grant assured him.

But his home life was unraveling. He was bouncing from home to home, living with his mom one month, his grandma the next, his dad the next. “Nothing was stable,” says a former coach at Oak Ridge, Kevin Goodwin. “I can’t tell you the number of houses that boy lived in from 2015 to 2019.”

Grant knew he needed a different environment, and quick.

“Who can you call about a place to stay?” Goodwin asked.

“Nobody,” Grant told him.

“OK, let’s go,” Goodwin replied. “You’re staying with me.”

Grant showed up at his coach’s door with his life in a trash bag. He stayed for most of his senior year. He ate healthier, dropped weight, kept his A average and helped Oak Ridge’s 4×400 relay team finish third in the Texas state championship, diving head-first across the finish line in a school record time. Goodwin still has a picture of it saved on his phone.

Then, just before Grant was ready to sign with Yale on a football scholarship, his hometown school called. [Houston](#) wanted him. In the end, he couldn’t leave JoJo and Samaria behind.

So he stayed, and life started to crumble. Mom wasn't around. Dad wasn't either, until he was, suddenly showing up for practices at Houston, planting himself two feet from Grant's position coach for the entire workout. "That was the first time I was like, 'I get it,'" says former Cougars assistant Blake Gideon. "There was this looming shadow."

Grant was trying to climb the depth chart on defense, trying to keep his grades up and trying to make sure JoJo and Samaria were safe back home.

"He literally had to raise his mom and dad and his brother and sister," Goodwin says. "Imagine doing that as a teenager."

Grant was driving back to Spring every week. He was missing classes, workouts and meetings because of it. "My mind wasn't there," he admits. He started lying to cover himself. He cheated on his girlfriend, then lied about that.

"All my life I lied about everything that was happening at home," he says.

For years he'd tried to bury it, the anger and resentment and shame he'd bottled up inside. But it was always there. He'd never fully processed his childhood. He'd never acknowledged how much the trauma lingered. He'd never been honest with himself.

He felt alone. He grew selfish. He lashed out.

His girlfriend told him all he ever did was hurt people.

For a while, he started to believe her.

Then he asked himself a question: If he was gone, would everyone's life around him be better?



Grant Stuard earned All-AAC first-team honors as a senior. (Courtesy of the University of Houston)

The sound he heard on the pier that night, the sound that stopped him from throwing himself onto the jagged rocks below, was laughter. A little boy laughing.

Wait a minute, Grant asked himself, wasn't I the only one here?

He stepped back. He looked behind him. A hundred yards away, he saw a father and son. They were fishing.

In the middle of the night?

He stared at them, stunned. The boy laughed again. Grant thought about his little brother.

Who's JoJo gonna have if I go through with this?

He walked back to his car, his heart oddly at ease.

"I told myself, 'I don't have a plan, I don't have a sense of what I'm going to do next, but I owe them enough to try.'"

Six months later, inside a church that sat in a strip mall, wearing an Iron Maiden T-shirt, shorts and sandals, Grant Stuard's life changed. He'd gotten in another fight with his girlfriend the night before, then sat in his car alone, as lost as he'd ever felt. He sped back to Spring, slept on his dad's floor, then drove to his cousin's church for a morning service. He parked his Mustang a few blocks away. The back right tire was flat.

The pastor spoke. He was an ex-felon and a former drug addict.

"Somebody didn't want to come today, but they're here," he began. "Somebody is struggling with their job and can't sleep at night, but they're here. Somebody got a flat tire on the way this morning, but they're here."

Grant perked up. No one had seen his car. No one could've known he had a flat tire.

"Now I'm paying attention," he says.

They broke into prayer groups. A man approached.

"The feeling you had last night, sitting alone in your car? That's the reason you're here," he told Grant. "That was God telling you to keep coming back."

At this point, Grant could barely speak. Tears welled in his eyes.

How could this man have known?

How could anybody have known?

“I hadn’t told a soul about the night before,” Grant says. “And for me, that was God showing me he existed. He was telling me he cared about me, like genuinely cared about me, something that was missing my whole life. For a long time football filled that void. Then girls filled that void. I always had this feeling I had to do everything for my siblings and everything for myself, and I always ended up feeling alone.”

A weight was lifted.

“He wasn’t there by accident, that’s what we kept telling him,” says Megan McCullum, who also spoke that morning. A former drug addict herself, McCullum worked in the same club as Grant’s mom a decade prior. After getting pregnant, she left the job and turned her life around. She got clean. She became a pastor. She started a family.

Grant saw the hope. In that moment, he clung to it.

Then he cut the toxicity from his life. He grew closer to God. He stopped lying, stopped cheating, stopped feeling like he had to be everything to everybody. He met the woman who’d become his wife, Josie, and proposed within a year. He came clean to his coaches and re-dedicated himself to football.

“He comes into my office one day in tears and tells me everything,” Gideon remembers. “I’m like, ‘Whoa, what?’ I’m sitting there watching a third down cutup, like that matters in that moment.”

The coach listened. He counseled. He kept his phone on all hours of the night, urging Grant to call whenever he needed. Then he leveled with him. “The best version of you is good enough,” Gideon told Grant before his senior year. “Keep working and you could change everything for your brother and sister.”

Translation: The [NFL](#) wasn’t out of the question.

“Grant always had that strength in him,” Gideon says. “He just lost his confidence and his direction.”

After bouncing from running back to safety early on at Houston, Grant found a home at linebacker. As a senior he broke out, leading the Cougars in tackles and earning All-AAC first-team honors. “He played with his hair on fire every single snap, with no regard for his personal safety,” Gideon says. “Not one time did I have to ask, ‘Can you give me more effort? Can you play a little more physical?’

“He’s also the worst walkthrough player ever,” the coach adds with a laugh. “He can’t tone it down.”

The following spring, Grant waited 258 picks to hear his name called in the 2021 NFL Draft. With the last selection, the Buccaneers made him Mr. Irrelevant.

While the family celebrated back in Spring, Grant snuck into a quiet room for a video call with reporters. A few minutes later, Laurel popped her head on the screen. She waved. She smiled.

She was high on meth at the time.

She was arrested a few hours later.

For years and years, Grant had begged his mom to go to rehab. Twice, Laurel had relented. The first time she stayed sober for a month. The second time she was high 20 minutes after being released.

“I had just given up on a regular life,” she says.

Her addiction spiraled. She was living in hotels, stealing cars, stealing from store shelves, stealing anything she could. She was also overdosing every few months.

By this point Samaria was a freshman in high school, struggling the same way Grant had a few years prior. Mom was gone. Dad was back in prison. Friends were worried. They called Grant, begging for help. He decided to pursue custody to keep his sister safe.

Laurel would essentially have to sign over her rights as a mother. Grant called, demanding she show up at a Whataburger to sign the papers. For a full week, she made excuses, running off to hotel rooms, getting high.

“If you’re not there mom,” he told her at one point, “I’ll never speak to you again.”

Finally, she made it. She signed. She left in tears. And not long after that, Laurel overdosed for the last time. Paramedics had to administer her Narcan, a drug used to reverse the effects of opioid overdoses, and give her CPR for so long it bruised her ribs. For weeks Laurel couldn’t breathe without searing pain, a constant reminder of how close she’d come to never waking up.

A month later, she called Grant.

“I don’t wanna die,” she told her son. “I just don’t know how to stop.”

Within a week, she dug up the binder Grant had been keeping for years, the one with all the brochures from all the rehab centers he’d looked into for her. Laurel started making calls, asking if they had an open spot. Some were full. Some wouldn’t take her insurance. Some were too expensive.

She kept calling.

Finally, hope. A place called Turning Point, in Tampa, Fla., seven miles from the Bucs' practice facility.

"Crazy, right?" Grant says.

For an early exercise, each patient was asked to write down how their drug use had negatively impacted their loved ones. Laurel hesitated.

She wasn't ready. She wasn't sure she'd ever be ready. She thought about her three children, about all those nights they'd been left alone while she was out getting high. She gazed at the front door. She considered sprinting right through it.

"There are no drugs in there, so all you're left with are the things you've done," she says. "It was so hard."

She stared at the blank sheet of paper. Finally, she started writing.

She stayed 90 days this time, working through the shame she'd been carrying with her for decades. She found a way to forgive herself.

"I feel like I got my master's degree in recovery," Laurel says. "This time, it just clicked."

After Turning Point, Laurel moved into a sober living home, counseling women in recovery, then started picking up shifts at Dunkin Donuts — her first job out of the sex industry since before Grant was born. Pretty soon, she was promoted to manager. Now she's back at Turning Point, this time as an employee, working with addicts hoping to change their lives the same way she did.

She's been sober since Dec. 11, 2021.

And she's also a new grandma. Grant and Josie welcomed a baby boy, Elihu, on May 24. The family gathered in Houston, Laurel and her three kids, together in a way they'd never been before.

"I thank God every day they still wanna be in my life," Laurel says. "And that they still love me, and they still want me in their lives."



After getting sober, Laurel Montgomery (middle) reunited with her three children: Samaria (second from left), Grant (middle) and JoJo (second from right). (Courtesy of Laurel Montgomery)

Laurel is almost three years clean. Dawayne, who did not respond to repeated interview requests for this story, has built a relationship with his son. JoJo is in college at Houston Christian. Samaria will soon be at Central Florida.

Grant is entering his fourth year in the NFL and third in Indianapolis, where he's become one of the Colts' top special teams weapons. Last December, in an overtime win over the [Titans](#), he scooped up a blocked punt and returned it for a touchdown. On his feet that afternoon were black and red Nikes, emblazoned with the words "Stuardship Foundation," Grant's pick for the NFL's My Cause My Cleats campaign. He and Josie started the organization to pour back into the community he came from, to show kids engulfed in trauma that there's a way out, impossible as it can sometimes seem.

"They're gonna be talking about Grant Stuard's story back in Houston for a long time," Goodwin says. "I remember thinking this boy's life is gonna mean a whole lot to a whole lot of people someday — that is, if he's able to make it through.

"I just thank the Lord he was able to make it through."

<https://www.nytimes.com/athletic/5582333/2024/07/24/colts-grant-stuard/>

I may be a harsh critic and skeptic of American Christianity, especially the polyglot of Protestant populist variations—have you ever thought to ask if you would want to spend Eternity with all those so sure they are going to heaven? —but I have to rethink my prejudice in light of Grant's experience in the storefront church. But I believe they might agree with me that God works in mysterious ways, and often despite human foibles, not because of human virtues. Even Grant, with his manifold, incredible virtues would admit the boy with the motor smashing walls was (more than) a handful, and his girlfriends could testify to his not always being such a nice guy despite all those virtues.^{TJB}