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## One Officer's Fall: A Badge Was No Protection From Addiction

BY CORKY SIEMASZKO

FOREST CITY, Iowa — On the day he fell from grace, Mike Haugen was a newly minted Sergeant in the Iowa State Patrol and two angels were arguing in his head over whether he should pocket the painkillers he'd just removed from an evidence bag.

"The good angel said, 'This is wrong, Mike,'" the 33-year-old recalled. "The other one said: 'It's just one time. The doctor will prescribe you more tomorrow.'"

It was 2015 and Haugen was between prescriptions while in the grips of an opioid habit that had him popping almost nine pills a day just to feel "normal," as he put it.

Too afraid and ashamed to ask anyone in the department for help, Haugen was trying to cut back on the pills — not realizing that by doing so he was setting himself up for a fall that would upend his life and make him a pariah in his profession.

Later, when Haugen was finally getting the help he needed, he was asked by doctors as part of his therapy to give a name to the urge that drove him to take 7,055 pills over a 27-month period — almost all of them legally prescribed.

"I chose Slick because he was a smooth talker," he said. "That day in the evidence storage room, Slick won the fight."

When Haugen returned from therapy, he was fired — although he was later allowed to officially resign and keep some of his pension. **\*NOTE he was NOT fired for receiving treatment for his addiction, it was for criminal acts committed on duty.**

"My record before this was top of the line," Haugen said. "There was not a bad yearly review. I had a health issue, and that took me down a dark rabbit hole."

### Police at risk

Like millions of Americans caught up in an opioid epidemic that the federal [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) says has killed more than 183,000 people since 1999, Haugen got hooked on prescription painkillers after a trip to his doctor. And experts say an untold number of those addicts are Police Officers like him who swore to uphold the law.

"Police Officers are more vulnerable to this because they get hurt more than civilians," said Sean Riley, founder of [Safe Call Now](#), a crisis service for cops and other public service employees in Washington State.

“The doctors think, ‘Who am I going to trust more than a Police Officer, and don’t hesitate to prescribe them opiates or refill their prescriptions,” Riley said. “We’ve created this perfect storm nobody has really addressed.”

And what Haugen did happens a lot more than people realize — or police brass admit.

“When you’re addicted, you are going to do things you would never do just so you can feel normal,” Riley said. “Opportunity is just sitting there in the evidence room.”

**\*Haugen sought treatment for a medical condition, ulcerative colitis. However, many Police Officers become addicted after being injured on duty.**

Desperate, Haugen went to a clinic in his hometown, Forest City. The doctor, Haugen said, prescribed hydrocodone — one of the most powerful pain medications available.

"It worked great at first," he said.

"I knew it was just a matter of time before somebody found out."  
But soon he began needing more and would grow anxious if too much time passed between pills.

"I would get depressed too and I couldn't understand why," he said.

So he went back to the clinic, over and over and over again, amassing a massive record of prescriptions from Dec. 16, 2013, to March 18, 2016.

"The conversation would go like, 'This isn't working for me,'" he said. "The doctor would say: 'Let's try this. Let's try that'. There was one month I was prescribed oxycodone, tramadol and hydrocodone."

Not once, Haugen said, did doctors raise any concern about him getting hooked.

"I never brought it up," he said. "The whole time there was that voice in the back of my head saying, 'I need these pills to survive.'"

Because to not take the pills, Haugen said, meant pure agony.

"Horrible doesn't begin to describe it," he said. "It was the flu times ten. The nausea, the body pain — you just want to die."

Through it all, Haugen was able to keep his secret from his co-workers, even earning a promotion to sergeant in 2015. His illness became his camouflage.

"Everybody thought, 'Oh, he's got to go to the bathroom a lot,' which is what happens with ulcerative colitis," he said.

Haugen said he also kept his addiction secret from his wife, Amanda, and their two young children.

"I didn't let any of the pill bottles show up in the medicine cabinet," he said. "She suspected a couple times, but she was used to seeing me sick. I couldn't tell her what was really going on. I was afraid of losing her and the kids."

He even fooled the doctors in December 2015 when he underwent the first of three operations.

"They didn't know," he said. "But I knew it was just a matter of time before somebody found out."

Haugen said he didn't have to doctor-shop and never resorted to illegal drugs like heroin.

"Ninety-nine percent of my prescriptions came from one clinic," he said. "I'd call in when I ran out and they'd give me a script. One of the doctors would sign off on it."

Then in 2015, Haugen got that sergeant's promotion, sending him out of a cruiser and into the Mason City headquarters. With his illness worsening, he was grateful to be near a bathroom. But the move also put him closer to temptation: One of his new responsibilities was logging evidence into the windowless, brick-walled evidence room.

"I don't remember how many pills I took the first time," Haugen said. "I don't remember what I did or how I acted in front of my co-workers. I just know that when I got home, I felt like needed the pills really bad."

## Wrestling with Slick

Months later, an investigator from the Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation questioned Haugen after hearing he was taking lots of prescription painkillers.

Haugen, who was placed on administrative leave, declined to say how the investigator found out. But he did say that the investigator was not aware that he had been stealing pills from the evidence room.

Within days, Haugen had checked himself into the famed Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation clinic across the border in Center City, Minnesota, and was wrestling with Slick.

"We have that voice in our head, that dictates what has lead, and keeps this disease fed," he wrote in one of the several dozen poems he composed as part of his therapy. "Only addicts can hear his voice, one that leaves us with no choice."

For five weeks, Haugen dealt with his addiction while he was slowly weaned off the painkillers. He said he came to understand that he did what he did not because he was a bad person, but because he had an illness.

There may be thousands of other Mike Haugens out there who have been sucked into the opioid addiction epidemic and are still on the job, said Riley, the Safe Call Now founder who is a former detective in Kirkland, Washington, whose own career was derailed by drug and alcohol addiction.

Riley said he's not aware of any studies that have quantified how many officers are struggling with opioid addiction, but says he hears from such officers "all the time."

Once they're hooked, many police officers feel trapped — even those who work for departments that give their employees access to psychiatrists and substance abuse professionals, Riley said. "You could potentially lose your job," he said.

Also, many police chiefs still think of addiction as a moral failure.

"It's a shame-based system," he said. "It's ingrained in the police academy that you are held to a higher standard. So if you're hiding an addiction, you're shaming yourself."

Jeffrey Goldberg, a New York City lawyer who represents NYPD officers in battles with the department, said he has had several clients who became addicted to prescription painkillers but were reluctant to tell their supervisors.

"The fear factor is that if you admit this human frailty then you can compromise your career with the Police Department," Goldberg said. "Police Officers do not like to discuss this even amongst themselves, for fear of being turned in."

When asked if troopers face punishment for disclosing addictions, Alex Dinkla, an Iowa State Patrol spokesman said in a statement, "The specific response will depend on the facts in an individual case."

"There are legal and policy distinctions between addiction and criminal and other misconduct," Dinkla said.

When asked if Haugen could ever get his job back, Dinkla said no, that Haugen had pleaded guilty to falsifying a public record and third-degree theft.

"These crimes are disqualifiers for law enforcement officers," the spokesman said, citing the state's administrative code.