

Reframing Aging â?? Courage never gets old: A journey from drugs and destitution to role in Apple commercial

Description

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On a fine spring afternoon earlier this year, Chet Peeples found himself on Appleâ??s futuristic Cupertino campus. He wasnâ??t there as a tourist or a job-hunting techie. Peeples, a 64-year-old recovering addict, was there to appear in a promotional film as a stand-in for Apple CEO Tim Cook.

Standing beside Tim Cook seemed utterly unexpected to him and anyone who had known him. His life had been filled with suicide attempts, homelessness, a near-fatal bout with MRSA, numerous overdoses and jail time. â??How do you explain that? Trying to figure it all out would put you in a psych ward,â?• Peeples says.

Peeples, one of five older adults being featured in San Franciscoâ??s Reframing Aging campaign, is now an up-and-coming actor. Heâ??s landed parts in commercials, done voiceovers and played small roles in indie movies and has a part-time gig as a tour guide. He works with other recovering addicts and has been a counselor in a number of city programs.



Chet Peeples, up-and-coming actor.

The video shoot at Apple was emblematic of a journey from an addicted and miserable past that nearly killed him, to a comfortable and satisfying life. Peeples is grateful for his recovery. And because his own journey to sobriety taught him so much, he has chosen to dedicate much of his time and energy to serving others.

â??Gratitude is an actionâ??

â??Gratitude is an action that expresses itself by doing things for others,â?• he said during a chat at a cafÃ© near his Hayes Valley apartment. But before he could do things for others he needed to do something for himself.

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Caring never gets old: Bus stop chats with lonely seniors â?? of all ethnicities â?? fulfill Navajo elderâ??s ideals

Determination never gets old: Energetic knitter who once fled war finds fruitful work and friends in U.S.

Recovery was a long road. His childhood was tinged with abuse and he suffered from ADHD. His father was a doctor who kept large, unsecured quantities of opioids and other drugs in the house. By the time he was a young man, Peeples was stealing to support a drug habit and become so well known to Memphis police that they used him as a paid informant.

He had brief periods of sobriety, and for 25 years worked as a mechanical design engineer. He also got married.

Peeples moved to the Bay Area in 2002 with a job offer and a wife. Before long he had neither. He said he was fired for smoking crack in the company bathroom, and his wife, a psychologist, had had enough. At one point, a doctor told him that the MRSA infection he was battling was likely to kill him. Somehow, he survived the deadly virus, but even that wasnâ??t enough of a wakeup call.

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Finding housing a turning point

Peeples was born in West Texas and grew up in Memphis, a past still echoed by a soft Southern accent. Heâ??s thin and fit and wears a short, sandy beard he had to shave for the role of the clean-shaven Tim Cook. When he smiles, he displays a mouthful of white and even teeth, another symbol of his recovery.

â??I was down to about 10 teeth. Being addicted to meth rots them,â?• Peeples said. But as he recovered, various programs enabled him to fix his mouth, shake off his addiction and end years of homelessness. Winning a city housing lottery that put him in a very affordable apartment was an important turning point, giving him enough stability to get serious about recovery.

Peeples has worked as a counselor at the University of California-San Francisco, and the cityâ??s Department of Homelessness and Supportive Services. Heâ??s active in a 12-step group, where heâ??s a mentor to recovering addicts and helps out with the sound system for the San Francisco Homeless Vigil. Recently he started speaking to medical students at UCSF, giving them a sense of how addicts respond to doctors and how the interactions can be improved.

Whatâ??s next? He working on a book. â??Not exactly an autobiography. I just want to tell my story.â?•

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