ADDICTION SUMMIT

From Horrendous Abuse to a Beaming Light of Hope
Guest: Jason Powell

The contents of this presentation are for informational purposes only and are not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. This presentation does not provide medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.

Dr. Paul Thomas: Hi, I'm Dr. Paul, your host for the Addition Summit. It is my privilege and pleasure to introduce to you today Dr. Jason Powell. Dr. Powell has done so much more than I could even imagine in his young life. He is the director of strings at Palm Springs High School. He takes his string ensembles and performs nationally, multi-nationally.

He got his bachelor's degree in music education, a master's from Boston University, a doctorate in educational justice and leadership. He's an active musician in the community. An adjunct professor with National University. He travels the world. He performs. He leads a lot of organizations. Has won numerous awards, and has traveled the world, really. England. He took a tour to South Africa. Was in President Obama's inaugural parade in Washington D.C.

He published *From Terror to Freedom - Empowering the Victim*. It is an absolute pleasure to welcome you, Jason, to this summit. Thank you for joining us.

What I hear, and I don't know your story, but I have heard what you bring to the summit, so this is an Addiction Summit. I imagine a lot of our viewers have struggled with addiction. A lot of them probably have come from childhoods that were perhaps rough, abusive. And all I know is that you had a pretty remarkable, tough childhood. I wonder if you could just start there.

From your earliest memories. Tell us a little bit of what it was like for you growing up.

Dr. Powell: Yeah. So I grew up in a very abusive household. My step-dad was extremely abusive. He and my mother were both addicted to speed. They were alcoholics. Smokers. There was, in and out of the house, always drug addicts. There was a lot of addiction around, and that always lead to a lot of abuses for myself, my mother, my three younger sisters and I. We had a very abusive childhood. That's what it is.

As far as memories go, I have a lot of memories. Just very aggressive, a lot of aggression from my father. Every time he would be high, it was a good time. That was the time we could get away with things. That was the time that we didn't have to fear. But it was every time he was coming down that we'd have to basically fear for our lives.

He would hit us with hammers. We've been shot. We've been stabbed. He would drag us outside of vehicles by our hair. He would take us out to canyons, draw a circle around us, and tell us if we moved he would kill us. He would leave us for three and four days at a time. We were in and out of abuse shelters. Tried run away, but there was no running away when you're in that kind of situation. It's easy to think that there's an escape. And there are organizations that help. But it goes so much further than just having the ability to get out. It takes a lot out of yourself. And if you don't have the right support, you always find your way back into that same situation.

Dr. Paul: Are you the oldest of several children?

Dr. Powell: Yes, I am. It was myself, and then my three younger half-sisters. My step-dad, obviously step-father. My sisters were his biological daughters. I was not from him. So he took most of his aggression out on me.

Dr. Paul: Got you. Did you have to protect your younger siblings as well, at times?

Dr. Powell: Yes. When my first sister was born, I was 10 years old. And they came home from the hospital. And she was crying. So he asked me if wanted to hold her, and I said yeah. So he gave me this newborn baby, and the second I got her she stopped crying. And at that point, he said, "Well there you go, mom." And he walked out and I didn't see my parents for several days after.

Dr. Paul: Wow.

Dr. Powell: So I instantly became the mother and father of my first sister, and then the other two as they came along as well. When aggression started to reach in the house, I would take them and we'd run away. We'd go live inside of dumpsters, behind the dumpsters. On the steps of churches. Wherever we could get away. As long as he couldn't find us, he couldn't hurt us.

Dr. Paul: Wow. That sounds terrifying.

Dr. Powell: It is. But when you're in that situation, you don't know anything else. It's just like…

Dr. Paul: Wow. That's hard for me to fathom. Living in this dumpster, no food, right? You're scavenging for food?

Dr. Powell: Yeah. Most of the time, our food. We did get welfare, but very often it would not go to us. It would go to him, and he would take it out and give it to his girlfriends. Or second and third families. Whoever he was giving it to. So we would eat out of the dumpsters.

Stater Brothers always throws away the chicken, the bread, the cornets of icing. That was kind of our livestock. And then on Sundays, if you sit through the church service, a lot of the churches will give you a bag of beans, a bag of rice. Some of the churches give away loaves of bread. So we would take that home, and that was our food.

And then of course, there's free lunch at the school. Which sounds great, but that's honestly the worst thing. I hated free lunch. Because I knew that my mother was starving at home. But you can't take anything with you. And you eat everything on your plate. And you watch the other kids throwing stuff away. It's a heartbreaking situation.

Dr. Paul: Wow. Yeah. I never thought of that quite like that. Although I can relate just a teense. When I was in boarding school, my parents were missionaries in Africa. And I always felt like, even though the food was horrible, we had more food than I had when I was home. As missionaries, they lived on very, very tiny budget.

And I remember, the would have a little trout. Just the tiniest little fish. And that was for a family of 6. And I remember my dad sucking off the eyes from the head. My mom would take the tail. And the four kids would split the little

tiny body. I'm thinking, I was eating the whole thing when I was in boarding school.

Dr. Powell: Yeah.

Dr. Paul: So I know that guilt just a teense.

Dr. Powell: Yes.

Dr. Paul: I can't even begin to imagine. How did you get out of this? You went through those formative teenage years in terror. Were you in school? How did you manage this?

Dr. Powell: I was, yeah. I was in school. I hated school. A lot of my classmates knew of my family's situation. I was trained to be, how do I say this right? My father would make me do whatever he wanted me to do. So in sixth grade, I burned down one of my teacher's houses. He would have me, any time someone upset him, he had me go kill all their animals.

Dr. Paul: Oh my goodness! He forced you to do abuse on animals?

Dr. Powell: Yeah, it was his training, is what he would call it. But in school, I just kind of kept to myself. I hung out with the kids that were in similar situations. So we were the problem kids.

I was somewhat liberated in my sophomore year in high school. My father had gotten a job. Sorry, my step-dad had gotten a job at a gas station. Which didn't make sense to us at the time, because he doesn't work. Turns out, he was robbing this Mobile gas station of thousands of dollars of alcohol every day. And the guy caught him. So the guy fired him, which is expected. But on his way out, he called him a few racial slurs, and my dad likes to think of himself as a white supremist. So he went back that night and he blew the place up. Literally, blew it up. There's a hole in the ground where there used to be a gas station.

Dr. Paul: Wow.

Dr. Powell: So he got arrested, and he went away. My mother at the time weighed 550 pounds. She couldn't wipe herself. She couldn't walk. She couldn't drive. We had a mini-van that we'd taken the seats out of the back, and I would pull up to the front door. And she would kind of plop down off the stairs into the van. And we'd go do our driving around like that.

And that was our first chance to actually get free, with him being out of the picture, out of house, we were able to do a little bit more. So, I started going to one of the local churches there, the youth group, and found some outlets there. Got involved with different organizations, one of them being a missionary organization. That got me out of the country for a little while.

And then when my mom passed away two years later, that's when I took over full guardianship of my sisters. And that's really when things started to change for us.

Dr. Paul: Whoa. So your mom, or step-mom, was 500 pounds. Pretty nonfunctional, I imagine.

Dr. Powell: Yes.

Dr. Paul: That was probably her coping mechanism to all the abuse she was taking, I imagine?

Dr. Powell: Yeah. She destroyed her body. She struggled with obesity her whole life but towards the end she really packed on a lot of weight. And it was a lot of guilt. She would break down crying and blame herself for everything. She had the power to leave; she could have saved us. So she wore a lot of that on herself.

Watched the movie, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*, and she broke down in tears and turned around and apologized to me for ruining my life. So yeah, she dealt with her pain through eating.

Dr. Paul: Yeah. Wow. How tragic. So you're 17 years old. And now you're taking care of three children?

Dr. Powell: Yes. My three half-sisters. They were 9, 8, and 2 years old when I adopted them.

Dr. Paul: And your step-dad is in prison, and your mom just passed away. And at 17, the state let you adopt these three children.

Dr. Powell: It was a long—it was a very long battle. But long story, yes. My mother, we were down at the hospital. I don't know how this makes sense. I don't know how it came to be. But my mom, she was in the hospital. She was sedated for several days. And they took me into the room, and they told me I

was the only one that could make the decision to continue the life support or lack of.

And so a gentleman came in, and he asked me what I believed. And I told him I didn't know what he was talking about. He said, "Will she go to heaven? Will she go to hell? What do you believe happens?" I said, "Oh well, I guess she goes to heaven. And he said, ok, I want you to understand that it costs thousands of dollars a day to keep her on life support. You need to make a decision."

So they had me pull the plug, and six minutes, 22 seconds later, my mom took her last breath and passed away. There was no one there to explain to me that this wasn't my fault. So I went home thinking that I was going to go to prison for murder. So the next day, I showed up to high school with my 2-year-old. The other two, I waited until they could go to school. I dropped them off. But where do you take a 2-year-old?

Dr. Paul: Right.

Dr. Powell: So I took her with me. And the school had a lock out system at the time. So children or students that were late to class, the doors were locked. So they would have to go stand out on the pavement. So I was wandering the campus, and somebody came over. One of the guards. He asked me, "What are you doing?" I said, "I don't know." He said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I don't know what I'm doing. I don't want to go to prison. I didn't want to kill her. It wasn't my fault." And he stopped and went, "Oh. Oh crap." Because, you know, I had a history already. The whole school knew it.

So they took me up there, and they finally—it took a moment to explain to me that I wasn't going to prison. That it wasn't my fault. So we went to the judge. I spent three days in psychiatric evaluations. At the end of it, the judge came down, gave me a big hug, and told me that he would give me everything. The house that you're living in, your debts are cleared. You keep it. You can go to college. You can do everything you need to do. He was just very pleased with my strength.

So in trade, I told them everything that my dad had done, where all the labs were, and all the people he was connected to. And my chore growing up was to shoplift. We would steal hundreds of thousands of dollars a night, and they couldn't figure out how. We would shut down department stores. So I told them how we did all that. So they rerouted all the security systems. And there was a lot of very bad things that had happened under his watch. So I

explained all of that to the police. They were grateful for all the changes they were able to make. And in trade, they gave me full guardianship of my three half-sisters.

So by the time I finally finished high school, I was 18, and I was an 18-year-old fulltime mother and father. My first year, one of the community members came down and gave me mother of the year award. Which I thought was cute, funny. You know. But it was good. The girls had a stable home for the first time.

A lot of the community reached out. A lot of the people, they recognized me. They knew me from childhood, taking my sisters out in a wagon all the time. So they reached out, and they helped. People helped out with food. I got to learn how to do all the parental things. Things like little girls, when they wear leggings, that doesn't count as underwear. Who knew? I had no idea until they sent her home from school. But it's a learning curve.

Dr. Paul: Phew. I am holding back tears, man. You are a freaking hero. I just can't believe what you went through. I went to a good boarding school. My struggle was dealing with college in the United States while my family was in Africa. You're at that same age, being a parent, being a mother, running a home, trying to do your own schooling. How on earth did you not turn to alcohol or drugs or say this is too much? How did you do this?

Dr. Powell: You know, I watched my mom. She struggled the whole time, her entire life. She was never pleased with the situation. She hated it. She cried herself to sleep. She always apologized to us. She hated it. But she couldn't break free. So I knew it wasn't her.

And my dad, when he was high, he was a somewhat decent person. He's brilliant. And so I knew it wasn't them; it was the things that they did. It was the lifestyle they chose. So I had a very deep, dark hatred for everything they did. To this day, I don't talk to smokers. It makes me sick. I don't like drugs. I don't like being around that stuff. It's literally a hatred for that lifestyle.

I believe that's the only reason I was able to do what I've done. Because I stayed completely away from it. I watched how it destroyed our lives. I watched how it destroyed my parent's lives.

I remember going through, and my parents would make me go crawl through the carpet, digging, because they had dropped a baggie and something had fallen out of it. So I was looking for small, white rocks. And in my head, I'm

looking for salt. Later on, as I got older, I learned to distinguish what I was actually looking for.

But when we get pulled over driving down the freeway—and my dad had a stick shift, the bottom of the stick shift where the material is kind of like a sponge there. He had disconnected it from the truck, so he would drop his stash through that. And then we'd go walking through the dessert looking for where it may have fallen out.

It wasn't them. It was the lifestyle they chose. My dad would get high, and he would start tweaking in the middle of the night. He'd be taking apart engines. He used to boil car batteries on the stove. And so we all had severe lead poisoning.

When my youngest sister was born, she was born mentally retarded. She had so many issues. She had 99% lead poisoning. She should not have lived. And yet, here she is today, health and strong. But I watched all this stuff they did, and the surroundings. People wouldn't talk to us. We were disgusting. We didn't have electricity. We didn't have water. We didn't have heat.

So for a period of time, I stopped taking my shoes off. Because at night, when you take your shoes off, in the morning it hurt to put socks back on. They were hard. They were crusty. And your feet would freeze. So I didn't take my shoes off for six months. When I finally did take my shoes off, my toenails had rotted. My skin was rotting off my body.

It impacted me. It impacted my relationships. My friends. My schooling. My sisters. My neighbors. One of my neighbors had a billboard in their front yard. An 8-feet wide piece of plywood, 8 feet by 4-foot painted white with a giant arrow that said, Martin Harry Downing at 49168 Vista Drive is a registered child molester. And the whole city knew.

Which he was. They knew who we were. They wouldn't look at us. People were terrified to talk to us. That lifestyle destroys everything. It destroys everything.

Dr. Paul: Oh my goodness.

Dr. Powell: The only way to get away from it is you have to man up. You have a decision. You can justify everything and say, "I'm afraid to stop. I need this." But, you know, it all comes down to my life belonged to three little girls. And if I wanted them to have a chance, I had to stop. I had to change every single thing.

So everything that I wanted to do, I couldn't. I wanted to go hang out with friends. I wanted to go to college the way normal kids do. Because you've got to break that chain. No matter how strong it is. It's just something you have to force out of yourself.

Dr. Paul: So your siblings, were you guys subjected to sexual and physical abuse?

Dr. Powell: Everything.

Dr. Paul: Oh my goodness. How did you juggle—you went on to college. I mean, I'm looking at all your accomplishments. You're a PhD. How did you juggle all of that?

Dr. Powell: You just don't stop. You know they say sharks, if they stop swimming, they drown. I had a fear that I would fall back like them. Right after my mom passed away, a good friend of mine told me, "Your mom died from being fat. That's in your blood. You better be careful." And so I started to panic. I thought, oh my god!

People wouldn't talk to me for the longest time, because I was Red Dog's kid. So out of fear, they would avoid me. And I didn't want that. I didn't want to be his kid. I didn't want to be that person.

The first time I got to college, and I was playing guitar. One of the teachers said, "Wow, you're really talented." I kind of stood back because they knew my name, and they said I was talented. I said, "Wait, I'm talented?" And they said, "Yeah, you're amazing." And I went, "I'm amazing?"

So I went home, and I practiced, and I came back the next day. And I said, "Look what I've done." And they said, "Wow. You are worthy. You are worth value. You have so much to offer." And I went, "Are you sure you have the right person? Me? I have that?" And so I didn't stop.

I continued to work, and work, and work until I proved myself. It took a long time, but I finally got to a place where I realized, you know what? I'm not my dad. I'm not my mom. I am my own individual, and I'm not in their lifestyle. That's how I made it through.

Dr. Paul: That's amazing. That is just amazing. You talked about, you went into music. A guitar, is that your favorite instrument? You probably have tried others?

Dr. Powell: Yeah, it was my bachelors and masters I went through in guitar and percussion. After that I got into stringed instruments. And now violin is my latest passion.

Dr. Paul: Wow. Do you think that, music and having an instrument, played any role in giving you something other than—to me, it's just so overwhelming. The total sheer magnitude of responsibility you had, almost in a sense. Because you were willing. I don't know how many people would have stepped up as you did. But because you were willing, in a sense, you didn't have time to go drinking or drugging. You've got three little girls you're taking care of. How old were they when you took over?

Dr. Powell: 9, 8, and 2.

Dr. Paul: 9, 8 and 2. And you took care of them all the way through their—till they grew up.

Dr. Powell: Yeah, from birth on. I mean, really when they came home from the hospital, I immediately took, I was the mom and dad.

Dr. Paul: You were the parent.

Dr. Powell: Yeah. I was the fulltime parent. Dad was in and out of the house. And if he was in the house, we were terrified. And mom was too big to do anything. So it really was me the whole way through. The only change is, when I adopt them, I have legal guardianship. I had to sign all the papers. And figure all the stuff out.

To answer your question, yeah, music absolutely helped. It gave me something to—it gave me an identity. That's what it came down to. I was used to being the things my dad would call me. He was very racist. He was a very hate-filled person. So I was that little [inauidible] little that nobody wanted that [inauidible] on the corner.

He would tell my mother, "Tell your son, that little [inauidible] that I said blah-blah-blah." I didn't have a name. In fact, he gave me, somehow, a second birth certificate and social security number with a name that isn't mine. When he

went to prison I burned that identity. I didn't even have an identity. It wasn't until I was 17 years old when I finally became Jason Powell, my birth name.

And so playing music gave me something to connect to. It gave me an identity. I was able to say, I am this person. And people weren't looking at me. They were looking at this talent. They were looking at the instrument. So they were no longer looking into my past or what was going on at home. They were looking at the moment I was showing them. So it gave me liberation.

Dr. Paul: Man. I'm in total awe of you, of what you have done. Because I deal with addiction patients all the time. I deal with thousands of teenagers in my pediatric practice who are struggling with challenges. I've never heard a story like this.

And yet, I would have thought, if that was my story, I'd be dead from addiction, homicide, suicide. It's too much pain almost to imagine. And somehow, not just yourself, but you raised three girls. And none of them are affected by addictions?

Dr. Powell: No, they're fantastic. I mean, don't get me wrong. I definitely have my moments as well. Growing up, I longed for death. Every day, I wanted nothing more. I would lie in bed at night. I would wake up with migraines from gritting my teeth and my nails. I would wake up with cuts in my palms where I would flex my fists so hard because I wanted to go in there and beat my dad to death with a baseball bat.

I definitely had my moments. It was not easy. It wasn't a walk in the park. There are still effects today. I didn't go to a single football game in high school. I didn't go to a dance. I didn't have friends the way everyone else did. I didn't get to go do the things they did. I didn't get to go to college the traditional way. There are still things that pop up now. I've got gaps in my memory that I can't find, years that are missing that don't make sense.

It's just, you have to deal with. We all have a choice. We can, it's like playing cards. You can trade some cards in and keep going, or you can stop. The reality is, I can quit. But no one is going to feel sorry for me. The world is not going to stop and go, "Oh, honey I'm so sorry this happened to you." They're going to say, "Ok. I'm sorry, that sucks. Figure it out."

So the only person I can worry about is myself. At the same time, by taking care of myself, that gives me something to present for my sisters. For my own

children. For my wife. For my students. For my job. For everyone that I'm in contact with. People depend on me, and if I give up, what use am I?

Dr. Paul: Yeah. Man, Jason. I just want to put my arms around you and hug you like my own kid. You are just—I'm telling you, the world is going to send you energy. Your story of victory over such adversity is inspiring. Absolutely inspiring.

Take us through—you got through that nightmare. Obviously, so much of it, I'm sure will be a lifelong thing of… That journey of just staying emotionally, spiritually sound. I know you've done a lot. You're teaching, right? You're like this person, I'm sure, the kids must just adore you.

Dr. Powell: Yeah, I'm very lucky. I get to teach what I love. The kids choose to be in my class. I get to goof off with the kids all day. And then every year, at the end of the year, I sit down on the senior's final day, and I basically lay myself out. I give them everything. My dissertation. Chapter four is my life story, most of it. And so I make that public to them, so that way they can read it. I try and encourage them that there's nothing they're coming from that they can't liberate themselves from. So the kids, yeah, they absolutely love it.

I know what it is to not have value. So when the students are talking to me, even if only for a minute, for that minute, that student is the most important thing in my life. So a lot of the kids, they'll tell me that they feel so valued when they're around me. And it's just taking the time to listen to them, to give them an identity. So I'm very fortunate. I have a good job. I have a good family. It's good.

Dr. Paul: Yeah. That is so, so special. One of my other interviewees for the summit shared a story. So those of you who are watching the whole summit, you're going to hear this story. But you probably didn't have this as a child, but you're doing it now for your kids, in the school. He tells the story of when you play tag. Somebody is counting to 50. They're at the tree. "Ready or not, here I come!" And everybody else has scattered. And they're hiding. And they've got to get to the tree and touch it before that person catches them.

So my guest was saying he wasn't the fastest guy. He'd wait until he thought he could make it, and he's dashing for that tree. He's being caught, he's being caught. He finally gets to the tree and he slaps it, and he says what? Safe. And I got goosebumps, because I thought, he says, that's how our homes are supposed to feel. That's how our classrooms are supposed to feel. And you're doing that for those kids in the classroom.

Dr. Powell: Yeah.

Dr. Paul: You didn't have that as a kid. You didn't have safe.

Dr. Powell: No.

Dr. Paul: You had the absolute opposite. You had terror.

Dr. Powell: Yeah. Oh yeah. Going home, yeah. The bus ride home. It was like 35 minutes to get home, and it's the worst 35 minutes ever. Definitely do not have that. But yeah, that's absolutely what I'm providing for our kids now.

Dr. Paul: Kids know what teachers are going to keep them safe. And god bless you for what you're doing. Because I know. Because of where you came from, you can spot the ones that are not feeling safe.

Dr. Powell: Oh yeah. You can smell it when they walk in the room. The second they come in, something's wrong. Absolutely.

Dr. Paul: And then you just provide that safety net. Oh, my goodness. You are a blessing to absolutely everybody that is touching your life. And I'm so grateful now you get to reach out to a much broader world.

This message you're sharing, just from your story, is extremely powerful. I think you did your—we were talking just briefly before about your PhD thesis or dissertation. You had a theory, but you weren't sure it was the right theory. Tell our audience a little more about sort of what you were doing with your studies and some of the thoughts you've had.

Dr. Powell: So I did an autoethnographic dissertation which is an inward study on child abuse. My wife did the exact opposite, we did the same doc program together, but she did hers interviewing the counselors and the foster parents, the outer sources from the abused, the inflicted.

Dr. Paul: Wow. Are these dissertations available for somebody to see anywhere?

Dr. Powell: Yeah, absolutely. Mine's right there on my website. If you go to PSStrings.com. it's down, under the director's page. Right there ready to go.

Dr. Paul: Wow. That's interesting. Sorry I interrupted you. Tell me more.

Dr. Powell: Yeah, they're both on ProQuest. They're free downloads. But in my dissertation, my conclusion is that I was able to liberate myself by giving myself an identity through music. By being a musician, I would go in and say, "You're talented." It gave me belief in myself. So I was able to detour people from this inward pain from this person that I didn't like, to this instrument.

And if the instrument was out of tune, it's easy. I fix the instrument. And now look what I've done, let's pay attention to the guitar. Let's pay attention to the drum. Whatever it is that I'm playing. And then, it's off of me. And after years of doing so, it finally gets to the point of, I am the musician. I am this new identity.

So my thesis, or my conclusion, is that children must have electives in school. They have to have something to attribute themselves to whether it be baseball, or volleyball.

But some of the girls, you take some young lady who goes home, and dad trying to be supportive, in a non-abusive household, says, "Hey, honey, I brought home some Weight Watchers. I thought you might like this." And no one thinks anything twice of it. But in the girl's head, she's thinking, "Dad thinks I'm fat." Why is she thinking that? Because at school that day she tried to play baseball, and she was outrun getting to first base. And someone says, "You need to move your butt faster." So in her head, she tells herself she's fat. So she can't join the swim team.

You never know what's going on in their heads. But they have to have something they're good at. So calligraphy class. Fencing. All athletics. All arts. Drawing. Paper mache. It doesn't matter what it is, the kids have to have something.

And we can't wait for the Boys and Girls club, because the Boys and Girls club only has so much staff to keep the kids safe. They have some arts and some athletics. But that's not for everyone. The schools need more.

And that's what my dissertation was fighting for. If we're going to talk about minorities, we have causes out there to help children that have autism. We have programs that are for African American children. For the Hispanic children. For the girls. For the gay. For the straight. We have all these things.

But one group we never look at is the poor foster kids. The abused kids. The kids that are probably most likely to be the next shooters are the ones that no

one is talking to. So my finding was, we need to have programs available for them to attach to. To attribute themselves to. To take on that identity.

But since publishing my dissertation, I believe there's more to it than that. I think part of the biggest reason I was able to make it through is, I was a shield for my sisters. I was the protector for my sisters.

When things got heavy, when my dad was—one of the final nights we were there, he lit a trashcan on fire in the living room, and he was throwing things in there. He was going to throw us in next. It was this horrifying moment. But I was able to get my sisters and get out of the house.

He came in, and he wrapped a phone cord around my mom's neck and dragged her in. And he was reaching for us. So I grabbed my sisters and we ran out of the house. So I became this protector, this shield. This entity. So I was able to deflect all the pain that I was feeling on myself. I was deflecting it in order to protect my sisters. So in a way, it numbed me from all that was going on around me.

Since then, looking at other people that have liberated themselves from such tragic backgrounds, one thing that they seemed to all have in common is they were the protector over something, over someone. Over their mother. Over a sibling. Over an animal. Over a possession. They had to keep something safe. So by taking on that identity of being the protector, they found liberation.

Dr. Paul: That's beautiful, Jason. I think it's actually both. Here's what I'm thinking. Your first thesis that every child needs something they're passionate about or something that they can excel at, I think has real value. As a pediatrician, I see that.

When I'm counseling parents of kids who are struggling with self-esteem, depression, anxiety, whatever. ADD. They're doing poorly in school. Behavior problems. If those kids can find something they're good at and then get even better at it, like you did with music, then they've got something that's special, that's theirs.

And then your protector identity is special-special. With a capital S. Super special. Superman. Because that's a huge identity, too. Right? You are doing something that's so important. What could be more important than, in your case, saving three girls? Three little girls. It's a powerful message.

So folks, if you're hearing this story and you're not touched, I don't know what to say. This is so powerful. Just the rawness of your story, Jason. To empower us who are watching, and hearing, and being a part of your journey here. To know that, alright. I'm in something rough here. Something that's abusive or neglectful I don't like. And I can do something. I can protect somebody, something, someone. Myself. Sometimes the person you've got to protect is yourself.

Dr. Powell: Yes.

Dr. Paul: And that's maybe where you've got to start.

Dr. Powell: Yeah.

Dr. Paul: Wow. This is very, very special that you've been willing to share all of this with us. As we get kind of closer to wrapping it up, I don't want to turn off your faucet of this personal journey you're sharing. Thoughts that come to mind? I know when we first talked you're going, "I'm not addicted. I don't know if I'm right for this summit."

I can tell you, you are so right for this summit! This is a message everybody needs to hear. Because we all who have struggled with substances, with behaviors, with addictive behaviors, self-esteem problems, overeating, smoking, drinking, drugging, gambling, masturbation, pornography, you name it. We're all trying to fill some emptiness. And we're all usually running from something.

The message you're sharing here is what, get passionate about something?

Dr. Powell: Yeah. I mean, really. That's what it comes down to. A friend of mine told me once, "Once you have children, you're going to realize that the first half of your life you eat for pleasure. The second half, you eat for sustainability because your life belongs to them."

I think that's what it is. Colleagues, friends, coworkers, people that we don't know yet. Young people that talk about, "Someday I want to have two children. I want to have the American, a son and a daughter." Then stop. Don't give excuses. Just stop. Get passionate about it. You have to overcome it. You can't wait for someone else to do it. There is no drug that's going to help you.

There's no point in my life that I've looked back and I've thought, "Man, I wish I ate more when I was at that all-you-can-eat buffet." We get in there and we gorge ourselves because we want to get our money's worth, but really, what are we doing? We're justifying our downfall. We're justifying our shortcomings.

Get passionate. Take your own life into your own hands, and say, "No!" Look at yourself in five years. If you're really that tempted, whatever that thing is in front of you. We could say, it's so tempting. But in five years, are you going to look back and go, "I wish I had done it." Is it really that powerful? Does it matter that much?

In 10 years are you going to look back and go, "Man. That last Cinco de Mayo, I wish I drank more tequila." No. That's not something that goes through our heads. But we will always look back and say, "I wish I spent more time with my children. I wish I read this book. I wish I had studied more Spanish. I wish I had learned a second language. I wish I had traveled more."

We wish we had done all these things that we justifyingly give up because of our addiction. And by all means, I'm not saying that addiction is not real. It is absolutely real. But like you said, become passionate. Become passionate about our own lives.

Dr. Paul: Yeah. I just had a thought, and I don't even know if I should share it. But I'm going to try it. Because sometimes, oh I'm going to regret this. I'm having this thought, so many of my patients, and back when I couldn't stop drinking. Those of us who are or have been in bondage to addiction, there's a painful process of letting it go.

Your dad, who was addicted and couldn't stop. Your mom was addicted to food and couldn't stop. When you draw that line in the sand and you say no more, you go through withdrawal. And depending on the substance, it can be horrendous. Like opiate withdrawal. You're talking the worst flu, with shakes, and shivers, and diarrhea, and puking. I mean, you feel miserable for days. And then you feel so anxious for sometimes weeks or months.

But I'm thinking, Jason, you went through hell for years. Years. Folks, take that angst and that pain that Jason went through. And you say, if he can go through it for years, I can go through it for weeks or months. But just the withdrawal. You've got to be willing to just fight.

You fought for your very life. It was pure survival. And you fought to survive. And any of you who are fighting addiction, don't give up. Don't give up hope. You can win this battle. And Jason's story tells us that anything is possible.

Dr. Powell: Yes. There was a time period when—I don't remember if it was heroin or cocaine. But my dad had decided to stop. And it was exactly what you said. He was in a bathtub for three days. I could hear him in there vomiting and crying. And he's a big guy. He's a scary dude. Tattoos from the neck down, just a monster of a man. And I could hear him in there just bawling his eyes out. Shaking and cringing. And it was so painful. And it was like three days of floor crying. It was terrifying for us, because we're thinking at any moment he's going to break through the wall and he's going to take it out on us.

Even with that kind of pain, if he'd gone back, we all knew that it wasn't going to be any better. No matter what, you have to come to terms with it at some point or another. Either it wins and you die, or you win and you have to suffer through it. It's like getting a root canal. It sucks, but it's worth it a year down the line. And for us to have any value, we have to, like you said, go through it. Go through the shakes. It's not fun. It's not comfortable. But what value do we have if we don't take control of ourselves?

Dr. Paul: Right. Are you married now, Jason?

Dr. Powell: I am, yes.

Dr. Paul: Do you have kids?

Dr. Powell: Yeah, I have two children. I have a 10-year-old son and an 8-year-old daughter.

Dr. Paul: Wow. And everybody is healthy?

Dr. Powell: Oh yeah.

Dr. Paul: That's awesome. Look at this, guys! From where you came from, Jason. Now you are giving back to your kids, to your wife, to your children at school. Wow. I'm in awe.

Dr. Powell: Thank you.

Dr. Paul: I'd like to give you a last opportunity to just share whatever message of hope, encouragement that you would like to give to anybody that's watching this today.

Dr. Powell: Ooh. My signature on my emails is, "If you look at a person for what they are, that's what they'll remain. But if you look at a person for what they could be, that's what they'll become."

Dr. Paul: That's perfect. Thank you, brother. Thank you, my friend.

Dr. Powell: Thank you. It was wonderful getting to speak with you and share. Thank you for this opportunity.

Dr. Paul: Folks. You take Jason's past, and that perseverance, and that survival instinct, and that no matter what, we're going to get through this. Apply it to your life. And join us on the journey. I'm Dr. Paul. Thanks, Jason.

Dr. Powell: Thank you.