NO ROAD IS EVER STRAIGHT:
DR. KEITH AUERBACH AND THE ART OF ADDICTION

Aaron Burch

Twenty-five stark black and white images line the walls of the Pyro Gallery at 909 E. Market Street in downtown Louisville. The only guides are small phrases scratched in diagonal slightly jagged handwriting. The images are arranged thoughtfully to show the temptation, despair, and potential redemption of an everyday person struggling with addiction.

The artist is Dr. Keith Auerbach, an acclaimed photographer, psychiatrist and psychotherapist who has long been fascinated by the intricacies of substance abuse. His new exhibit, *Inside the Experience of Addiction: Photo Stories on Using, Abusing and Recovery* provides a window into the high peaks and low valleys of addiction, for both the user and their loved ones.

"I wanted to talk about the experiences that people actually have," said Dr. Auerbach, speaking at the Pyro Gallery just hours before it opened to the public. "I've treated a lot of addictions in my practice and it's always a peculiar process to understand how someone can get into these repetitive, obsessive compulsive habits. Though my patients have shared their vulnerabilities, I realized there's all sorts of things they don't talk about. Almost worse than the addiction is the denial, the secrets they keep."

Arranging and curating these pieces, Dr. Auerbach kept in the back of his mind what those suffering from addiction keep just below the surface: the shame of letting down a loved one; the flashbacks to moments of weakness; and the candlelight flicker of hope that the future will be better than the past.

"What people in recovery realize that others often do not is that addiction is both a medical illness and a spiritual illness. You're doing something that beats up your own essential goodness. So what you want to do to get sober is find that place in you that's your soul or spirit because that's where the power is," said Dr. Auerbach.

The *Inside the Experience of Addiction* exhibit as it exists today is still not finalized. Perhaps it never will be. It's evolved many times since the idea initially came to Dr. Auerbach nearly 30 years ago. When he returned to photography just a few years ago after a long hiatus, the project remained just as he'd left it.

"I've been friends with a nun at St. Catharine College for years, and she knew I was delaying this process. About a year ago, the college decided they'd require their students to read a book about addiction called "Broken" by William Moyers, and she wanted my exhibit to accompany their other curriculum. She called me up and

said she wanted my show ready by the end of August."

That lit a fire under Dr. Auerbach. The students were set to read the book, see the exhibit and then sit down with both the author and the artist, but first he had to finish what he'd started years ago. It took most of the summer as he immersed himself in hundreds of photographs, eventually narrowing down his images to the most striking few dozen and adding captions to each.

The show was a great success. "People can recognize when they're being seen, when they're being understood in a kind way," Dr. Auerbach said. "At St. Catharine, a woman came up to me and said she really liked the show. She said, 'I'm two years in recovery. I've thought these thoughts. I've felt these feelings. I've done these things and you presented them in a way that's kind and clarifies that choice. I can choose to do this or that. I wish I'd had these in recovery because my mind was too foggy to realize some of these things.' That's the kind of feedback I've gotten."

With the sketch complete and the feedback incredibly positive, Dr. Auerbach began to investigate how he could bring his work to a larger audience and receive feedback more from those who had suffered through addiction themselves. He decided to begin conversations with local addiction recovery centers in Jefferson County including The Healing Place, the Kentucky Physician Health Foundation, the Morton Center and more. What did the people who see new addicts every day think about his work?

The Morton Center is an outpatient facility which offers professional counseling and therapy groups for families and individuals struggling with substance abuse. Priscilla McIntosh has been with The Morton Center for five years, serving the last three in the role of CEO.

"I loved the images that Keith brought to us. There's still such a stigma placed on people struggling with addiction, so people don't understand yet how much stress it places on the individuals around you," McIntosh said. "I hope that more people can understand by looking at these images and hopefully that starts another conversation."

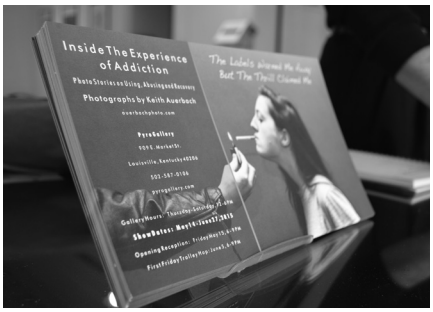
Dr. Auerbach reached out to Ms. McIntosh, sitting down with her and The Morton Center's art therapist John Jasper to collect their thoughts on his work prior to public exposure. McIntosh focused on an image with a mother holding a child. The caption reads, "Once I was old enough to understand, the wounds of my heart were deep."

"The mother holding the child reminded me of an individual who loves someone who's struggling with an addiction but what I saw vs. what John Jasper saw vs. what Dr. Auerbach saw were all completely different."

Dr. Auerbach then presented his work to Karyn Hascal, President of The Healing Place addiction recovery center, and Heather Gibson, Program Director for The Healing Place's women's facility, for their thoughts and feedback.

"I thought it was great," said Hascal. "Different people relate to different forms of communication. Some are more visual than others. Dr. Auerbach's images give people an opportunity to find a different way to get in touch with their feelings. It's another mechanism for reaching people."

The images used by Dr. Auerbach stretch across 40 years of photography as both a hobby and a passion. Some are dream-like, a staircase reflected in a mirror that otherwise isn't in a room. Some are intensely real, a couple talking or a young boy sitting alone on the arm of a chair. "What you have to do is get into the feeling that's present. I was looking for the decisive physical moment as well as the decisive emotional moment," explained Dr. Auerbach.



As for the captions, Dr. Auerbach explained that finding the right words to correlate with the photos was often the hardest part. "Mozart said when he was composing that he looked for notes that loved each other. I was looking for words and images that matched. Just one word can alter everything. It was a lot of writes and rewrites. I'm still rewriting," he laughed.

Dr. Auerbach is so dedicated to the evolution of his process that he kept a basket of the exhibit images and blank lines near the Pyro Gallery entrance. Guests were invited to write their own potential captions for each photo and submit them as well.

"I want the whole public to interact and consider this. When I took the show to The Healing Place, to the Morton Center, they were so spontaneous! They all came up with something different. You project your own issues on to each photo. People who have lived with addiction may come up with much better titles than I can."

Dr. Gregory Jones is the medical director for the Kentucky Physicians Health Foundation, which cares for physicians affected by substance and alcohol addiction. Dr. Auerbach reached out to Dr. Jones in the winter of 2014 to ask about the project and invited him to see the exhibit in its current form just prior to the gallery opening.

Dr. Jones agreed to get the word out, putting a link on the foundation's website and taking cards to put in their offices. The art may have spoken to him more directly than others.

"I'm in recovery myself. I have been for a little over 19 years," he explained. "There were two pieces that I caught a feeling from. There was a photograph of a person on the end of a diving board, diving out into nothing. That first step into recovery feels like a leap of faith. That one felt right. It resonated with me. Another one was more lighthearted, where a bunch of legs were holding up a car was titled, 'The first 12 step meeting.' I thought that was humorous. It doesn't register in reality but the whimsy spoke to me. You have to have some light-heartedness to get through recovery."

Despite more awareness in the community at large about the nature of addiction, many are still close-minded to the humanity that remains at the center of every addict.

"I'm in favor of anything that raises the conversation so more people are aware that addiction: 1) is a very common and pervasive illness and 2) has a treatment and isn't hopeless. There are a whole lot more people than you know that have already made that journey and you never know about it because anonymity is a crucial part of recovery."

Just a few days after "Inside the Experience of Addiction" opened in May, Dr. Auerbach was given a written message by a gallery visitor. It read:

"Thank you for making something so brave. It took me decades to overcome the fallout of my father's cocaine addiction, and sometimes the memories still take my breath away. This exhibit was so honest, so cathartic. I love you for making this."

While the exhibition of Inside the Experience of Addiction ended on June 27, the art continues to live on as an ever evolving piece looking for future homes. More about Dr. Keith Auerbach and the exhibit itself can be found at www.auerbachphoto.com.

Note: Aaron Burch is the communications specialist for the Greater Louisville Medical Society.