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## Bad Beat (/people/bad-beat.html)

Written by Noah Austin | Category: People (/people/) | Issue: April 2018



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**Valley journalist Joe Watson lived a double life as a gambling addict and stickup man. Having fulfilled his debt to society, the former Phoenix New Times reporter has a new passion: prison reform.**

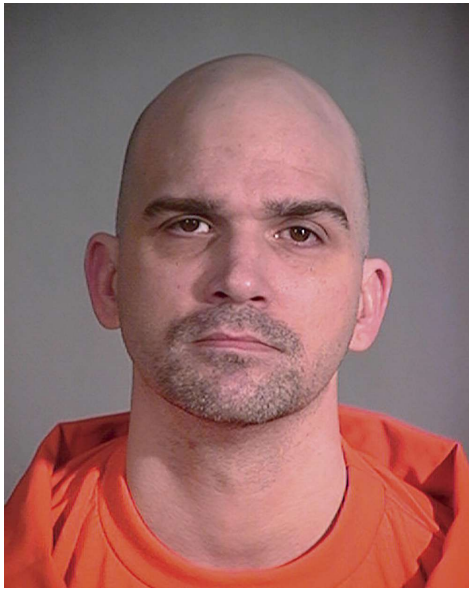
**On March 1, 2007**, Joe Watson walked out of Casino Arizona in South Scottsdale around 3 a.m. He had lost. Again. In the preceding two years, his compulsive gambling had cost him tens of thousands of dollars at poker and blackjack tables, derailed a promising journalism career and destroyed many of his relationships. So he made a plan. Or, at least, got an idea: He would get in his car, drive

“somewhere north,” find a cliff and drive off it.

“I had decided I was beyond help. Beyond redemption,” Watson says now. “But I looked at my gas gauge, and I was on fumes. That was problematic.”

Eleven years later, Watson, now 46, is telling me his story on the patio of Phoenix’s Clarendon Hotel. He and I have known each other for 15 years, since our time at Arizona State University’s journalism school, and we’ve stayed in sporadic contact over the past decade – mostly via letters once a year or so. But until now, I’ve known very little about what led Watson to that night in 2007 – and what happened after he pulled up to a gas station with the last \$5 to his name.

The onetime *Phoenix New Times* scribe has since kicked his gambling habit and is picking up the pieces of a life shattered by addiction and bad choices. He’s doing better. But sometimes you have to hit rock bottom before finding your way back – and sadly, Watson was about to reach that point as he idled at the gas station 11 years ago. He struggles to talk about it, to find the words. It’s an unfamiliar feeling. The words used to come a lot easier. “I can’t tell you what came over me,” he says. “I just didn’t care about myself. I didn’t care about anyone. And suddenly, the desire to die was overtaken by my survival instincts.”



(</images/articles/04-2018/PHM0418JW01.jpg>)“I thought: You know, I’ll just rob this place. And that’s what I did.”

**Watson’s way with words** was evident in his first journalism class, a Mesa Community College news-writing course he took as an elective after going back to school at age 25. His instructor spoke with him after the first assignment. “He said, ‘You’re pretty good at this. Have you done this before?’” Watson recalls. “I said, ‘No, I’ve just read a lot of newspapers.’” It was a glimpse of a future for Watson, who’d graduated from high school in Kingman after moving there from North Phoenix with his mother and grandmother. “My mom said she wanted to live in a small town,” he says. “Conveniently, the small town was very close to Laughlin and Las Vegas.”

Watson’s mother was an enthusiastic lifelong gambler, teaching her son to play blackjack and poker when he was just 5 years old, and letting him tag along on her frequent casino trips. But the seeds of the addiction didn’t immediately take root. For teenage Watson, gambling was a culture of parental indulgence and nicotine-stained hotel rooms, not the thrill of chance and adrenaline rushes. Much more interesting were the house parties he found at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, where he enrolled after high school, concurrently enlisting in the United States Navy Reserve. Quickly, he partied himself out of NAU and moved back to the Phoenix area, where he met a woman and fathered a

daughter. The relationship didn’t last, but the desire to better his life and provide for his daughter was what brought him to MCC.

The newswriting class led to a job at the school paper, and Watson made journalism his major. Next came a job, first as a clerk and then as a copy editor and sports reporter at the *East Valley Tribune*, and a transfer to ASU. At the *Tribune*, “I felt like maybe I had something that would be rewarding and would make my daughter proud,” he says.

But then the hometown Diamondbacks played in the 2001 World Series, and Watson faked a cough and got out of his shift when a friend offered him a ticket to Game 2. The sports editor spotted him at the game, and he was fired.

Watson was devastated to have blown the opportunity. But he still knew how to write, and people recognized his talent. He was hired at *State Press Magazine* and *The State Press* (ASU’s student magazine and student newspaper, respectively), and later became the paper’s managing editor. He freelanced for *Phoenix New Times* and completed a *Food & Wine* internship in New York. When he returned to Phoenix, he pursued a staff writer position at the *New Times* and got his “dream job,” leaving school in 2004, one semester shy of graduation.

At the *New Times*, Watson wrote cover stories Valley journalists still talk about, brushing aside the mainstream topsoil to find a menagerie of rabble-rousers and misfits in the Sonoran Desert. Perhaps the most famous of these stories was *Baby Man*, about a 54-year-old Phoenix bachelor who wore diapers, slept in a crib and dressed in adult-size baby clothes. Watson’s bosses loved the ideas he pitched and the stories they became. From the outside, his career looked solid. But Watson, an ASU dropout working among graduates of Yale and other prestigious journalism schools, had what he calls a “fraud complex”: a creeping, overriding fear that he didn’t belong. He worried that he hadn’t learned enough about crafting and organizing a narrative. He became certain he was one bad story away from being fired.

All of this is news to fellow former *New Times* journalist Stephen Lemons, who saw nothing inferior in Watson’s work. “I thought he was a great writer,” Lemons says. “We’d have pitch meetings, and some writers would have a hard time coming up with ideas, but he always came to the plate with something, and then he’d execute it very well.” But Watson says he began pressuring himself. When the words didn’t flow the way he wanted, he got anxious. He never plagiarized or fabricated stories, he says, but “I had an idea of where I should have been in my career, and I wasn’t satisfied. I wanted each story to be better than the one I’d written before it. But I didn’t believe I possessed the skill set to produce better writing.”

(/images/articles/04-2018/PHM0418JW02.jpg)



One day in 2005, while he was working on a story at the office, his stress snowballed into a panic attack: *This is going to be a terrible story. I'm going to lose this job. Then a dark idea took shape: If I'm going to lose this job, maybe I can take all those gambling tricks Mom taught me when I was a kid and win some money. Because I'm going to need it.*

He left the office, got in his car and drove to a casino.

**At first**, Watson's gambling paid off. He won a few thousand dollars, gained confidence and kept his anxiety at bay. "You get that instant gratification, and you feel so good about yourself," he says. But the lucky streak waned, and he started gambling more and more. Within six months of that first casino visit, he was hooked. He fell into a binge-purge cycle familiar to many addicts: "I'd stop, and I'd stay clean for a couple of months, and then I'd use [gambling] to make myself feel better – even though, ultimately, it just made things worse."

Unbeknownst to Watson, the pattern of abuse was identical to that traced by a typical alcoholic, according to Dr. Steven Boles, an addiction medicine specialist at John C. Lincoln Medical Center. "It's easiest to understand pathologic gambling as essentially severe alcoholism without the use of alcohol," says Boles, a 2017 *PHOENIX* Top Doc, adding that the brains of alcoholics and gambling addicts exhibit many of the same neurochemical features and dispositions.

Watson told a handful of loved ones about his addiction, but his colleagues were in the dark. Lemons says he knew only that Watson loved the 1998 Matt Damon gambling movie *Rounders* and liked to play cards – not that he'd play for hours and days on end. Not sleeping. Subsisting on cigarettes and soda. Going to another casino. Going back to the first casino. Chasing losses with more losses – in all, Watson estimates, his habit cost him about \$65,000 over two years. He saw a therapist, attended Gamblers Anonymous meetings and voluntarily banned himself from Arizona casinos. Nothing worked.

His personal life deteriorated. At the time, he was living with then-*PHOENIX* managing editor Ashlea Deahl, to whom he was engaged at various points over those two years. But the pressures of his "nasty gambling problem," as Deahl later recounted to the *New Times*, had caused the two to put their relationship on hold. (Watson declines to discuss his ex-fiancée.) Meanwhile, he started missing deadlines at the *New Times* and, according to a May 2007 article by Lemons, ran afoul of management at the paper when it was discovered he was freelancing articles for *PHOENIX* under the pseudonym Zachary Best. Watson finally parted ways with the *New Times* in late 2006.

In quick succession, he was hired and fired from two more media jobs and was on the verge of losing a third by the time he had his early-morning reckoning at the gas station on March 1, 2007.

Instead of putting that last \$5 into his tank and finding a cliff, Watson jabbed his finger into his coat pocket to pretend he was holding a gun. He had no disguise. "I walked in, and there was this poor kid behind the counter," he says. The kid gave him \$120 out of the register. And Watson – drawing on a memory of a robbery he and his mom experienced when he was 9 – told him to go in the back and count to 60.

"I read in the police report, later, that at that moment, he was terrified that I was about to shoot him," he says. "I figured there was no way he could believe I actually had a gun. I thought he was just following procedure. But he was... terrified. And it was easy."

Watson can't remember how he felt during the robbery, other than that acting on his "survival instincts" temporarily nullified the despair he was feeling. In the aftermath, he felt newly confident – even after he sped away, went back to the casino and lost the \$120. "Because now, I had this new source of money. But I figured: I'm not going to need to do that again. But if I do, I've got this trick in my bag."

Of course, he did use that trick again, and again, and again. In all, he robbed 10 people – four men and six women – at nine businesses, most of them in North Scottsdale, over the next month. Two of the businesses were tanning salons, robbed hours apart – leading police to say they were seeking an armed robber they nicknamed the "Salon Bandit."

Soon, the thoughts of suicide returned. By the time Watson committed his last robbery, at a Hollywood Video, he was hoping the cops would show up and shoot him. He took that few hundred bucks to the casino and played until 5 or 6 a.m. He went home, then to work for a couple of hours before heading back to the casino. That's where he was the afternoon of March 30, 2007, when a surveillance video from one of those tanning salons led to the next phase of his life.

"I was sitting at a poker table, about to make a bet," he says. "I looked over at the dealer, and somebody had pushed him out of the way." The next thing he knew, he was being tackled, handcuffed, hoisted up and walked to a patrol car. An officer asked for his name, and the words left him. He passed out.

**March 30, 2007**, was Watson's last day as a free man for more than a decade. He was indicted on 10 counts of armed robbery – even though he was never technically armed – with a total potential penalty of 200 years in prison. At one point, he was offered a plea deal for a 25-year sentence. He gambled once again, and turned it down.



"It's hard for me to say I didn't think 25 years was fair," he says. "Because I know a lot of people would say, 'You robbed 10 people. Of course 25 years is fair.' There are a lot of people who think I should've spent the rest of my life in prison."

Watson spent three-and-a-half years in Maricopa County jails, pursuing various legal strategies, before he was sentenced. During that stretch, his case attracted coverage by the *New Times* and other media outlets. (Watson won't comment on that coverage.) While he was in county lockup, his mom died of emphysema, and he had little contact with other family or friends while behind bars. In jail, he kept gambling – using poker chips made of toilet paper and colored with marker, playing for honey buns and cupcakes from the commissary. And even though Watson had never been violent before his arrest, in jail, words didn't matter – and every disagreement turned physical.

In May 2009, he and another poker player at the Fourth Avenue Jail went to a cell to fight. "I was in way over my head with this guy," he says, and the man got him in a chokehold: "I tapped out, but he wouldn't let me go. I couldn't breathe." Finally, another detainee stopped the fight – and then, Watson says, he had a realization: This isn't worth it. I don't want to die anymore.

Outside of 12-step programs run by inmates, Watson didn't get much help tackling his gambling problem. So he did what he knew how to do. "I found that writing really helped," he says. "Not as a direct attempt to be rid of my addiction, but in gaining self-awareness."

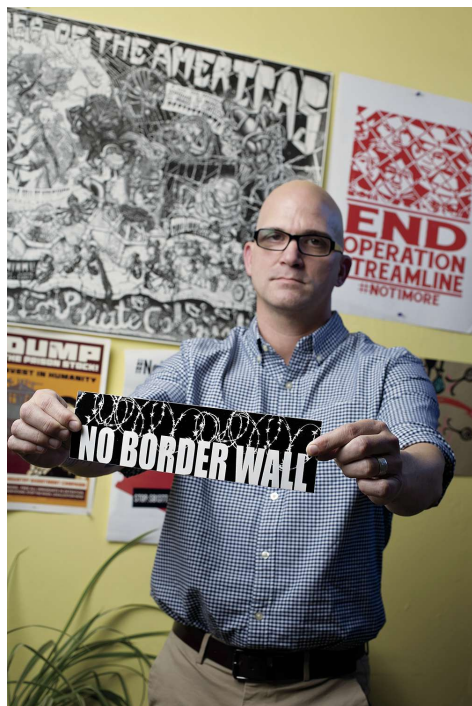
He examined his own behavior and made a list of things he needed to stop doing – "things I would say, ways I would manipulate people, lies I told." And even though he'd apologized at his sentencing to one of his victims, he says this was the first time he'd been honest with himself about who he was and how he was harming people.

The real catalyst for change was a 12-year sentence – a large chunk of his adult life, to be sure, but also one which meant he wasn't going to die in prison or be released as a senior citizen. At state facilities in San Luis, Kingman and Tucson, he worked prison jobs, including as a tutor for other inmates, and wrote for *Prison Legal News*, a monthly magazine that reports on criminal-justice issues.

Ultimately, he arrived at "a sort of self-acceptance of being OK with not being the smartest guy in the room. With not caring so much about what other people think." That came, he says, not from self-help books or finding religion, but from deciding "to stop lying to myself about who I am. Or who I was."

He met Clyde Hardin, who also was serving an armed-robbery sentence, at the Kingman prison. "That environment isn't really conducive to playing well with others," Hardin says, but he and Watson bonded over fatherhood, music and their post-release plans. "I started noticing, right off the bat, that we'd talk on a different level than I would with anyone else," Hardin says. "We understood we had made mistakes, and we tried to learn from it and move forward."

Watson's time behind bars also opened his eyes to the challenges most prisoners face – challenges he never had to worry about. "Most people in prison come from poor communities," he says, "or they're already marginalized based on their race or their gender. That wasn't the case for me." It was a realization that would inform the next phase of his life.



</images/articles/04-2018/PHM0418JW04.jpg>) In June 2017, Watson was released early from the Tucson prison he'd been transferred to for a program for veterans. Shortly before, he wrote a story for *Edible Baja Arizona* on the ways inmates spice up their limited culinary options. An excerpt: "Cooking prison lasagna is a weeklong affair that includes rolling out pasta 'dough' derived from crushed ramen noodles and slow-cooking the meat sauce – summer sausages, beef crumbles, salsa and leftover beef bouillon packets from the ramen – inside a plastic bag over boiling water for eight hours."

Fulfilling his 12-year sentence, Watson is on community supervision until next March. He says he feels regret every day about what he did – and he knows he should: "I bullied and intimidated 10 people. Some of them feared for their lives. And I can't change that."

He still thinks about his addiction, but says he hasn't had the urge to gamble in about eight years. The reason, he thinks, is the same reason he no longer cares what anyone thinks of him: "It's just acceptance – knowing what's really important, and knowing that my first priority is the people who love me."

**Once out**, Watson decided to settle in Tucson, which he says was a different environment than his previous two prison stops. "There were a lot of people there who were into reforming prisons and ending mass incarceration," he says. "They seemed to have empathy for people who were incarcerated. It's such a compassionate community, and it was evident in all the people who would come into the prison."

He now works for the American Friends Service Committee, which advocates for, among other things, ending mass incarceration and improving conditions for inmates and those recently released from prison. When he tells me his story at the Clarendon, he's in Phoenix for a panel discussion at an ASU social justice conference, then testifying at the state Legislature to support bills aimed at easing hardships for inmates and those re-entering society. He's teaching a class at the University of Arizona Poetry Center on mentoring incarcerated writers, and this year, he'll complete a MacDowell Colony fellowship in New Hampshire, where he plans to work on essays or a memoir about his experience.

Watson is passionate about his work because he knows few people get the second chance he's getting. "A lot of people... see this articulate white guy, and they think, Wow. He could really do some things," Watson says. "And it's so unfair to the thousands of people who are going to get out of prison this year." People don't realize, he adds, that all inmates "are worth investing that time and that energy and that compassion."

Not long after his release, Watson met Juliana Piccillo, an advocate for the rights of another marginalized group, sex workers. They married late last year. "I can't imagine my life without her," he says. "We're partners in everything."

His support network in Tucson also includes Hardin, who left prison in 2015 and has become a close friend. And he's hoping to rebuild a relationship with his young-adult daughter, from whom he's estranged. But his work, he says, reminds him daily of the path he took to get here. The decisions he made that night, and before, and after. The people he terrified. The cliff he didn't drive over, and those he did.

"I can't advocate for people ensnared in the system without thinking about how I ended up in the system," he says. "But I ended up in the system for different reasons than most people. I was a privileged white guy. I had an education. I had a good job. I had people who loved me. And I still squandered it."

Gambling, he notes, is all about risk. And maybe the thrill of risk is what drove him to make all those dangerous and destructive choices. He truly doesn't know. All he knows, he says, is how to move forward. What would he say to others facing a gambling addiction? Watson thinks for a long while, then speaks slowly and deliberately. He's found the words now. He just wants to be sure he gets them right this time.

"The things we think are simple, or not that exciting, or not so extraordinary – those things are the most important things in our lives," he says. "Those things are ultimately going to bring us the most safety and comfort. And those are the things worth risking so much for."

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