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TREVIÑO

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Today, Treviño, 55, barely resembles the trusted Edinburg journalist whom the Rio Grande Valley would invite into the living room each night to deliver the day's news.

Gone are the suits and ties, large glasses and thick pancake makeup from his days on the air. Cropped short, his hair shows a bit of gray. His skin and eyes show signs of a hard life lived.

The former broadcast journalist found his way out of the darkness of addiction and away from the edge of suicide, discovering reasons to work. To write. To live.

Recently, Treviño published *Sparks from a Ninety-Five*, a book of poetry (published under the pen name Ben Robert Benjamin) full of insight from a man who lived a life of local fame, crushed by addiction and who, in a way, has reinvented himself through meter and rhyme.

*Nightclubs and beer joints
The good times took me far
I wrote about the weather
While thinking about the stars.*

(Excerpt from "The Short Version")

In 1977, Treviño was hired as a camera operator for KGBT's news crew. "I came into the business when they were making the change from film to video tape. At that time in the Valley, Edinburg High School was the only one with a radio/TV film program and I had some experience with video tape cameras," he said.

He continued attending college at Pan American University and worked weekends at the TV station. "I would shoot video, I'd take notes and then I would turn them over to Frank Sullivan, who was the anchorman at the time, and he would write the story," he said.

Treviño quickly learned the ropes in the newsroom and was granted more responsibility.

"As I got more and more experience, someone asked if I'd like to start reading my own stories," he said.

He learned how to edit and report and eventually moved up from camera operator to reporter to weekend anchorman.

By 1991, Treviño worked his way up to the anchor chair. Treviño enjoyed the spotlight. He received invitations to the biggest events of the Valley and he networked with important people in town.

"It was a connected lifestyle in the Valley," he said. "... People wanted me (at their events)."

But cocaine didn't necessarily go hand-in-hand with the social ladder he climbed. Treviño came from a good family, he said. He had a good upbringing. In high school, he was straight as an arrow.

"It wasn't until college that I started smoking ... and drinking a little more than recreationally," he said.

Still, he didn't touch cocaine.

In 1985, though, the drug had become so prevalent, he said, it was nearly impossible to ignore.

"It was all the rage; it was in all the movies. It was part of the culture, and that's how I got started snorting it," he said.

*Well, gone is all the money
My rebound will take a while
I pace around my sad room
And add up all the miles*

(Excerpt from "The Short Version")

The longer Treviño used cocaine, the more he needed it, and the more his personality changed.

The beginning of the end for Treviño was when he started freebasing, or smoking crack-cocaine.

"It was off to the races. Just one time and I was hooked," he said. "I couldn't get enough of it."

On the job, Treviño was volatile, hostile and his mood could change in an instant.

Rumors swirled about fights which took place between Treviño and his co-anchor Irma Garza while reading the evening news.

"There was no ending," he said. "There was a lot of shouting, a lot of profanity. It wasn't like that scene in *Anchorman*, but there was a lot of name-calling and it got real ugly ... verbally. But there were no punches thrown." Garza could not be reached for comment.

There were disagreements on editorial policy — today, Treviño says he takes full blame — and differences of opinion would set him off. Treviño had similar arguments with KGBT's management, he said.

"There were several incidents like that," he said. It was a huge blow and shock for Treviño when he was called in by his bosses and let go.

"They said, 'We're not renewing your contract,' and it was totally out of left field," he said. "It blew my mind. I was let go unexpectedly, and from that point on I was never able to get back and break back into TV."

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"I knew full well what I was doing," he said. "I just didn't give a f---."

He owed two people money, and he had promised to pay them that day. Treviño said.

The dealers he owed weren't threatening bodily harm. The only threat looming over Treviño that day was not getting a fix.

"It wasn't even a fear for my own life — it was a fear of being cut off," he said. So Treviño headed into a local supermarket to replenish his cash flow.

"It was directly across from the police station," he said.

He walked up to the courtesy counter with a note claiming he had a gun, though he didn't actually have one. Treviño pocketed \$2,700 — enough to pay off his debt and keep his drug flow secure. Eventually, though, the well went dry.

Less than a three-month span, he robbed a bank and two more supermarkets. The crime spree ended when store employees managed to apprehend him.

State and federal charges stacked against him, Treviño was indicted and sentenced to more than three years in prison.

*Standing under neon
Hiding all my scars
I was right about the weather
But wrong about the stars*

(Excerpt from "The Short Version")

Prison was exactly what Treviño needed to get clean, he said.

"They say all you need is 70 days, but I was a special needs case," he said. "I needed every bit of that three-and-a-half years to recognize the gravity of what I was facing, the consequences of my actions."

Treviño is grateful for the sentence he received — he could've been sentenced to 20 years for each offense, he said.

He and Alexa have a strong relationship now, and he's found two more important reasons to stay

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clean — one grandchild and another on the way.

"Avery, her daughter — my granddaughter — will be 3 in October. And the new baby will be born almost on the same day," he said.

In *Sparks from a Ninety-Five*, Treviño shares his thoughts through poetry on a number of topics.

His poetry reveals how prison and addiction affected him. He pulls no punches, offering the reader gory details of his life before redemption.

He also writes about nature, love and death.

"The genesis was my journalism during rehab and prison," he said. "The poems grew out of those notes."

Drawing from his experience as a TV newsmen, he decided to try to tell parts of his story in short clips, or poems.

"It was a series of 30-second, 45-second, one-minute stories I would have to write, and I was forced to get a lot of ideas into one small format, which is kind of like poetry," he said.

As he wrote more and more poetry, his friends began to encourage him to publish, though he wasn't interested.

"To me, this is therapy, and that's my only concern. If I sell two copies, I'll be happy," he said.

Treviño doesn't crave a spotlight. He refuses to be seen as a role model. His life, he said, should not be an example of how to crawl out from the oppression of addiction.

"I'm more of a cautionary tale on how to not conduct one's life," he said, laughing.

"I'm compiling a second collection of poetry, which he may or may not publish. "There's definitely no money in it. It's a lot of work marketing it," he said.

Finding work remains difficult for Treviño because



Courtesy photos

At top, Ben Treviño, left, is seen during a reporting assignment in Washington, D.C. Above, Treviño, second from left, is seen in the anchor chair on the KGBT-TV news set.

of his time in prison.

"Ninety-nine percent of jobs (you apply for) is going to have that box, that question: 'Have you ever been convicted of a felony?' And they'll tell you it doesn't matter, they just want to know, but my experience is you're put down (at the bottom) of the stack," he said.

Currently, Treviño works as a freelance writer and reporter for a variety of media.

For eight years, he has been able to fight his addiction to cocaine and crack, but he doesn't rest on his laurels.

"I try not to put too much bank in the fact that I haven't smoked crack in a while because I know I could wake up tomorrow

morning and decide to do it," he said.

Each day, though, he fights the urge and pours himself into writing. Each moment, he makes a conscious effort to say no.

"If anything, if people want to take something away from it, there's always a reason to live," he said. "No matter how bad things get, there's always hope, there's always mercy, if you stick it out long enough. Because sometimes it seems like it's never going to end. There is redemption if you work at it hard enough — in its own time, though."

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