

DEADLY FAKE:

The pull of fentanyl was stronger than everything else, until the baby came

Nyah Berrios dropped out of one rehab after another, but a positive pregnancy test finally pushed her into recovery.



Nyah Berrios shows her one-week-old baby, Jaxxyn, to the family dog at her home in Tuscola, Texas. Nyah found out she was pregnant in December 2022 while fighting a fentanyl addiction. In June, she went into a 45-day in-patient treatment program in Dallas and has been clean since. (Tom Fox / Staff Photographer)

By **Claire Ballor** | Staff Writer
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TUSCOLA — As a nurse laid the baby, all pink and slick, on her chest, Nyah Berrios closed her eyes and felt the commotion around her fade. The voices in the room quieted until all that remained was the baby, gently rising and falling with her breath.



Nyah gets ready for her day in her bedroom at her parents' home, Aug. 22, 2023. After completing a 45-day drug treatment program in Dallas for her fentanyl addiction, Nyah returned home to Tuscola. (Tom Fox / Staff Photographer)

She couldn't believe she had made it to this moment. She thought she would die before she ever got to the delivery room, but there she was, cradling her son.

She opened her eyes and looked down. His hair was thick and dark like her own. In between his heavy, slow blinks she caught glimpses of stormy blue-gray eyes. His tiny lips puckered and wiggled. He was so real.

I'm a mom. she thought. *I'm his mom.* His small fingers curled around hers.

Just 48 hours after Nyah gave birth, nurses came to take her baby to the NICU, where his little body would be monitored for withdrawal symptoms. He was born without complications, but for more than half the time he was in the womb, fentanyl had flowed into his bloodstream.

Nyah sobbed as Jaxxyn was wheeled away. Her heart raced. Every night for months she had spoken to him as he grew inside her. He was the reason she had gotten clean. He had saved her life. Now she couldn't stand the idea that she had hurt him.

It was supposed to be me who suffered. Not him.

While her baby was being monitored, a woman Nyah had been expecting visited her in her hospital room. Her badge said Child Protective Services.

“I've been dreading you for the past three months,” Nyah said.



Ahead of the birth of her son, Jaxxyn, Nyah holds a pair of blue yarn baby booties gift by a friend. After coming home from treatment for her fentanyl addiction in August, she kept herself busy by organizing baby clothes as she waited to go into labor. (Tom Fox / Staff Photographer)

This life — being a single 22-year-old mom with a drug addiction and a CPS case — was never supposed to be Nyah's.

She was the youngest of three daughters born to military parents. Her childhood in suburban Wylie was straight-A's, speech and debate, Percy Jackson novels and an 8 p.m. curfew. Her future was college, a business degree and a corporate career.

"It wasn't because of the cards I was dealt," she said. "I had great cards, I just shuffled them wrong, I guess."

In 2018, Nyah and her family moved from North Texas to Tuscola, a tiny town outside Abilene, for her dad's Air Force career. She still made frequent trips to Dallas to visit her high school boyfriend. She thought his friends were seedy, but she smoked weed with them anyway.

When she discovered her boyfriend had been taking Percocet, he asked her if she wanted to try one. She said no. He asked a few more times. One day, in 2019, she caved.

"That first time snorting one was the best feeling ever to me," she said. "I would do them whenever I would go visit my boyfriend and then not do it again."

Over time, she started to feel sick, and she didn't understand why. She'd feel better if she kept taking the pills, her boyfriend told her. So she did. She knew better than to mess with anything serious like heroin or cocaine, but this was just Percocet, she thought. Artists rapped about it in the songs she listened to. It wasn't a big deal.

She eventually found a dealer in her town. One pill cost \$30 — three times the amount she paid in Dallas — but she didn't care. She just didn't want to feel sick.

For months, she kept up with classes at Cisco College while the urge to take a pill intensified. She couldn't walk to the bathroom in the morning without taking one. She couldn't get through her waitressing shifts without one in her system. Her high school relationship ended, but the pills stayed. She tried to hide the baby-blue secret taking over her life.

In November 2022, she dropped out of college. She had been nodding off frequently, and her mom found blue pills in her room. Her parents called a family meeting. Something was wrong.

They sat Nyah down in the living room and asked if she was using drugs. She fessed up without a fight.

Her parents responded in their own ways. Nyah's Abilene-born-and-raised mother, Shan, was embarrassed. She knew the people in their small town would shun her daughter if they found out. Nyah's Bronx-born-and-raised father, Eddie, was angry. There's nothing he hated more than lying and stealing, and Nyah had done both to get drugs.

"If you're going to live here, if you have to stop that s—," he told her.

They don't understand, she thought. They don't comprehend how hard it is to quit. But she told them she would get it under control.

Nyah (right) visits with friend and Abilene Absolute Recovery Solutions founder Jasmine Majkowski (left) as they change Jaxxyn's diaper. Nyah went to Majkowski's clinic for a while in 2022 while trying to overcome her addiction. (Tom Fox / Staff Photographer)

Her parents took her to a 30-day treatment program in Abilene. When she arrived, she was drug tested. The test came back clean.



“Are you sure you have a drug problem?” the clinic staffer asked.

“Uh yeah, I’m sure,” Nyah said. She had just taken a pill before heading to the treatment center.

“Oh, you know what,” the staffer asked. “Did you ever do fentanyl?”

“I don’t know what that is,” Nyah said.

The urine test came back positive. Fentanyl was the only substance in Nyah’s system.

She Googled the opioid that had taken over her body and learned it’s increasingly pressed into counterfeit pills made to look like prescription Percocet. It’s 100 times stronger than morphine, and it’s one of the most addictive drugs out there, she read.

No wonder I’m in this so deep, she thought. This is worse than heroin.

For the next year and a half, she bounced between short stints of sobriety and long stretches of drug use, between assistance from treatment centers and her own sheer willpower, which failed her every time.

“I was on a merry-go-round of hell,” she said.

Abilene was short on drug treatment options. A methadone clinic opened in 2020, and when Nyah went in 2022, she was patient No. 54. Her dad hated the idea of treating drug addiction with another drug, but he was close to disowning her and didn’t know what else to do.

His anger felt familiar to Jasmine Majkowski, who started the clinic. The stigma in Abilene ran deep, and she was watching the city’s drug problem balloon because of fentanyl and because of the lack of education and understanding that kept people from seeking help.

Nyah would walk out of the clinic after daily treatment and immediately go take a pill. She was flaky, so Majkowski would call her to see if she was coming in, making a reference to a 1960s sitcom: “Car 54, where are you?”

After a few months, Nyah dropped out.



Nyah burps one-week-old Jaxsyn. She brought him home from the hospital days early after he was kept in the NICU for three days to be monitored for withdrawal symptom (Tom Fox / Staff Photographer)

Nyah looked down at the pregnancy test in her hand. It was the night of Christmas Eve 2022, and she was standing in an employee bathroom in the back of the hotel bar where she worked as a bartender. Two lines, bubblegum pink.

“We’ve got a problem,” she muttered through nervous laughter.

She fished a blue pill out of her pocket, flushed it down the toilet and finished her shift.

For the next two days, she didn’t take a single pill. Soon she felt sick and her stomach knotted and cramped. She was scared her withdrawals would cause a miscarriage, so she took another pill, and another, for a month.

“I’m still doing drugs,” she told her mom. “I’m pregnant and I don’t know what to do.”

Shan began calling every drug treatment center she could find. She searched in Texas, Oklahoma and Nevada. Each center she called told her the same thing — detoxing a pregnant woman was too much of a liability. They wouldn’t take her.

“I was getting a door shut every single time,” Shan said. “Nobody was willing to take the risk.”

When Nyah begged one clinic for advice, the woman on the phone told her she would harm her baby if she went into withdrawals, but she would also harm her baby if she kept taking drugs.

Nyah cut deli meat, sushi and unpasteurized cheese from her diet to protect her baby from salmonella and listeria, but she kept taking fentanyl. She hated herself every time she did it, but she didn’t know what else to do.

Help came during Nyah’s second trimester, when Shan called the Abilene methadone treatment clinic that Nyah had dropped out of months earlier. They told her to reach out to Parkland Memorial Hospital, Dallas County’s public hospital system.

Without asking any questions, staff of Parkland’s Perinatal Intervention Program told Shan they could take Nyah right away. They’d get her detoxed and take her to Nexus Recovery Center, a women’s in-patient clinic in Dallas.

On a warm May day, Nyah and her parents made the three-hour drive to Parkland. She sneaked six pills and took them in gas station bathrooms along the way. One pill was left when they arrived in Dallas.

Her parents dropped her off at the hospital and felt a flicker of relief. Before Nyah could fully detox, an insurance hangup drove her out of the program. A

week later, she gave it another try.

This time, she made it through detox at Parkland and was transferred to Nexus.

In early June, days before her 22nd birthday, Nyah set her bags down in the bedroom she'd live in for the next 45 days and cried.

If I don't get this right this time, I don't know what I'm going to do.



Nyah's aunt, Anna Banner (center), holds Jaxxyn while sitting with her husband, Cole Banner, her daughter, Chloe Hamrick (top left) and Hamrick's boyfriend, Jake Sexton (left). They stopped by to visit Nyah and meet Jaxxyn for the first time. Nyah's sister, Jasmine (top right), visits often to help Nyah take care of her baby. (Tom Fox / Staff Photographer)

Every day at the treatment center started the same way. A staffer would knock on Nyah's door at 6:30 a.m. and again at 8:30 a.m. She would get up and groggily walk down the hall to stand in line for her daily [buprenorphine](#),

the medication she was prescribed to help treat her addiction. She'd scarf a granola bar and head to the first of four classes of the day.

Nyah was there to reprogram her body to function without drugs, but also to relearn the coping skills atrophied by three years of fentanyl use. She was isolated from triggers and temptations but forced to confront her loneliness and boredom with nothing but a brown leather journal.

She wrote about her day, her fears, her cravings, her dreams of using and her anger at herself. She wrote about her five friends, one of them pregnant, who died from fentanyl. She wrote about her Nana, whose death a year earlier had hurled Nyah deeper into addiction. And she tried to write about her child.

She felt disconnected from her baby. He was now the size of a butternut squash, and when she tried to imagine him, he was as featureless as one. If she thought about him, she had to think about what she had done to him. She hadn't been able to stop using drugs when she found out she was pregnant. Did that mean she didn't love her baby as much as she should have? It was easier to push those thoughts away, but as her stomach grew and her due date ticked closer, they became harder to ignore.

One day, a teacher at the treatment center encouraged Nyah to talk to her baby.

"Talk to him?" Nyah said. "And say what?"

"Tell him anything," the teacher said. "Just talk to him."

That night, Nyah got into bed and started to talk.

"Hey," she said. "You ok?"

For the first time, she fully felt the existence of her baby. She started to cry. He started to kick.

“I’m so sorry,” she told him. “I love you, and I’m sorry.”



Nyah's son, Jaxxyn, wears a bandage over his heel where he was pricked for a blood test. He spent three days in the NICU after he was born to be monitored for withdrawal symptoms. (Tom Fox / Staff Photographer)

As part of her treatment, Nyah had to start the long process of forgiving herself. On July 17, the day before she finished the program, she sat down with a pen and paper and wrote a letter to her former self.

You're not going to die before you right your wrongs. You still have time to fix it all. I know you've given up. I know you don't care about living, and I know that smile is fake... I know you never even considered kids, but it's time to buck up because we have a miracle growing inside of us, and he deserves the world and we will do everything in our power to give it to him.

When it came time to go, Nyah was anxious about leaving the safety of the treatment center. No one judged her there. No one made her feel like she was unworthy. She knew it wouldn't be the same in Abilene.

She spent the next several weeks getting her bedroom ready to share with a newborn and trying not to be nervous about the uncertainties ahead. Would her son test positive for fentanyl when he was born? She had last used at 26 weeks pregnant. Would CPS make her live apart from her baby? Her counselors prepared her for that possibility, but she still couldn't fathom it.

She distracted herself by folding tiny baby socks and sitting in on virtual Narcotics Anonymous meetings.

It was hard not to feel lonely. Most of her friends were either dead from drugs or deep in their own addictions. The father of her baby was largely out of the picture. She had a supportive family, but she often felt like she was entering her new life alone.

She talked to Jaxxyn every night to keep company.

“It's you and me.”



Nyah's dog, Hades, looks for a bite of her Jimmy Dean Pancakes & Sausage on a Stick as she nurses her baby. (Tom Fox / Staff Photographer)

As the NICU staff kept watch over Jaxxyn, Nyah camped out in his room. They were looking for clues that his body was experiencing withdrawal, like body shakes, tight muscles and respiratory problems. Some of the signs they were looking for — fussiness, yawning, sneezing — seemed like normal baby behavior to her. It was hard to know what to worry over. She pried herself away only to sleep at night.

Jaxxyn had been born at nearly full term without any complications, which was the first hurdle to cross.

In utero opioid exposure can increase the risk for stillbirth, prematurity and low birth weight, according to Dr. Stephanie Merhar, a neonatologist and associate professor at the University of Cincinnati Department of Pediatrics. It can also cause neonatal opioid withdrawal syndrome. It's difficult to study the longer-term effects because prenatal drug use can come bundled with other issues such as a lack of prenatal care, exposure to other drugs or

alcohol, or a difficult home environment. There are too many factors and not enough studies to draw broad conclusions.

After three days, good news came from the NICU. Jaxxyn had no signs of withdrawal. He was cleared to go home.

More good news came from CPS: Nyah and Jaxxyn could go home together. The case would remain open, though, and a social worker would follow up to assess if Jaxxyn was going to a safe home.

The first few days after leaving the hospital and settling back in at her parents' house were a blur of breastfeeding, diaper changes and one-handed meals of microwavable Jimmy Dean Pancakes & Sausage on a Stick.

Nyah slowly began to settle into a daily routine. Wake up. Change Jaxxyn's diaper. Breastfeed. Heat up a pancake on a stick. Take buprenorphine and a postnatal vitamin. Change another diaper. Drink a mug of fenugreek lactation tea. Strap on the baby carrier. Wonder if the baby carrier is on right. Sway Jaxxyn to sleep.

She was tired and her body ached from labor, but she mostly felt lucky she and her baby were alive. She thought often about the people who had died from taking fentanyl once. At the height of her addiction, she was taking 20 pills a day. She wondered how it didn't kill her. And sometimes she felt guilty it didn't.

Less than a week after Nyah brought Jaxxyn home from the hospital, while she sat in the living room recliner and watched *Law & Order* while breastfeeding, a woman carrying a large package knocked on the door. It was Majkowski, the CEO of the Abilene methadone clinic Nyah had gone to before she was pregnant. She came to check on Nyah and to drop off a baby stroller.

She hugged Nyah hard. "I'm so proud of you for fighting for him to be here," she said.

Majkowski knew what it took for Nyah to get to that point. She had seen her at her worst.

She remembered how Nyah's parents struggled to bring her to the clinic even though they knew she needed professional help.



Nyah shows the tattoo she got on her left arm during one of the times she sought treatment for her fentanyl addiction. For years, before getting pregnant, she bounced between short stretches of sobriety and long stints of drug use. "I was on a merry-go-round of hell," she said. (Tom Fox / Staff Photographer)

"Your dad was so angry," she told Nyah.

Just then, Eddie and Shan walked in the door from work and sat next to Majkowski on the couch.

"I was this close to disowning my child," Eddie said, joining the conversation.

He's learned a lot about drug addiction, he said, but he worries about other people not seeing his daughter the way he does now.

"There is a lot of prejudice here."

He also lives with a perpetual fear that one day Nyah's addiction will resurface. He's not ignorant about the relapse rate for opiate addiction. Some studies show it's as high as 80%.

Nyah, however, is confident in her sobriety.

“I’m more confident now in staying clean than I am in being a good mother,” she said. “I used to see those as the same thing, that being clean would make me a good mom, but it’s so much more than that.”

Nyah’s mom scooped Jaxxyn out of the bassinet next to Nyah and held him against her chest. She rocked him. Checked his diaper.

“I never thought we’d be here,” she said.

She had to come to the agonizing realization that no matter how badly she wanted to fix her daughter, it was out of her control. She’d felt isolated as she tried to cling to hope while friends and family distanced themselves.

“We kind of suffered in silence alone,” she told Nyah.

“Oh my God,” Nyah said. “I did so much damage.”

All Nyah can do now is show them, one day at a time, that she isn’t the person she was when fentanyl took over her life.

Maybe one day her mom will no longer lock her bedroom door out of concern Nyah will steal money like she did when she was using. Maybe one day her dad won’t worry that a relapse is right around the corner. And



Nyah Berrios' mother, Shan, changes Jaxxyn's diaper after coming home from work. Shan called drug treatment centers around the country to find one that would take her pregnant daughter. (Tom Fox / Staff Photographer)

maybe one day she won't hate herself for what she did.

Earlier this week, Nyah and her parents visited the CPS office for a check-in meeting. Nyah hoped her case was ready to be closed, but she walked out with a to-do list instead. She remains hopeful the case will be closed soon.

She's ready to have CPS and any other reminder of the grip fentanyl had on her life fully behind her. She's not angry her life went the way it did, but she's eager to reclaim it.

She plans to re-enroll in college in the spring. This time, she'll study behavioral science to become a counselor and eventually open a treatment center like Nexus in Abilene.

Until then, she'll embrace the growing pains of motherhood and the slow but fleeting season of constant diaper changes and wakeful nights.

Jaxxyn's a month old. There's still so much she has to learn about him. Right now, he decides the rhythm of their days and nights. He doesn't fall asleep unless he's in her arms. The normalcy of it all is a gift.

It's in the middle of the night, when he wakes and the only thing he wants is her, that she feels closest to him.

She lays him on her chest to feel him rise and fall with her breath, and she starts to sing.

You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.

His cries quiet, and then stop.

You make me happy when skies are gray.

His eyes close, and she flicks off the bedside lamp.



HOW TO GET HELP FOR OPIOID ADDICTION

Texas Targeted Opioid Response: A public health initiative operated by the Texas Health and Human Services Commission: txopioidresponse.org

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: cdc.gov/stopoverdose/fentanyl

National Institute on Drug Abuse facts on naloxone:
nida.nih.gov/publications/drugfacts/naloxone

CRISIS LINES AND SUPPORT WEBSITES

Partnership to End Addiction: Help is available via phone ([1-855-378-4373](tel:1-855-378-4373)) or text message (Text 55753). For details and more resources, visit getsmartaboutdrugs.gov/find-help.

North Texas Behavioral Health Authority: 24-hour crisis hotline at [1-866-260-8000](tel:1-866-260-8000), or go to ntbha.org.

TEXAS TARGETED OPIOID RESPONSE RECOMMENDS THE FOLLOWING RESOURCES

SAMHSA National Helpline: Call [1-800-662-HELP \(4357\)](tel:1-800-662-HELP) or visit [samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline](https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline) for free, confidential 24/7 treatment referral and information for individuals and families facing mental health and/or substance-use disorders.

Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741 or visit [crisistextline.org](https://www.crisistextline.org) for this free, 24/7 crisis support counseling.

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: Call [988](tel:988) or visit [988lifeline.org](https://www.988lifeline.org) to access this free support network for people in distress, as well as prevention and crisis resources for you or your loved ones. Services are confidential and available 24/7.

Mental Health Texas: Provides learning and treatment opportunities for those coping with mental health conditions and those who support them. Call, chat or text to get help now. For details, visit [mentalhealthtx.org](https://www.mentalhealthtx.org).



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