

# Seeking sobriety amidst a culture of parties and drugs

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Larsen recalls memories of living with a previous significant other who he said enabled his addiction at times. He now has a girlfriend who supports his efforts to remain sober.

On a late Friday evening in a cozy two-bedroom apartment on the south side of Bloomington, and far from the clamor of Kirkwood Avenue and the house parties happening just off campus, 24-year-old IU sophomore Bennett Larsen laboriously tinkered with a 1-1/2-foot tall model robot from the anime series "Gundam."

The model — one of dozens seemingly occupying every inch of free space around the apartment — was made up of almost a 100 individual parts that Larsen would carefully piece together over the course of a few days. Depending on the size and complexity of the model, he estimates assembling a model can take from two hours to a week. His ideal night consists of five hours of model-making — no interruptions

"I'm definitely addicted to this," Larsen said. "I'd rather be addicted to making models than to marijuana. Trust me, it's a lot better than the alternative."

Larsen first came to Bloomington as a part-time Ivy Tech student before becoming addicted to marijuana and subsequently leaving the school and his internship program. He had smoked it once before coming to the city, but once he began smoking regularly at college, he found it difficult to stop.

"It turned from a couple times a month to every weekend to most nights," Larsen said. "One time my friend and I ran into each other on our way to our internship group first thing in the morning and we looked at each other and went to his room to get high."

Drug and party culture in Bloomington is like a

snowball rolling down a hill: once it starts rolling, it's nearly impossible to stop after a certain point. IU is known as a prominent party school, ranking in the top 20 party schools in the nation by Newsweek and Niche.com. Larsen's struggles to maintain his sobriety while in a college town is not uncommon; any all-encompassing culture only leaves stragglers that much more to the wayside.

According to a 2019 University of Michigan survey, over 76% of Americans between 19 and 22 reported consuming alcohol, while over 55% of respondents reported having used marijuana in the past. Additionally, the 2018 version of the same study reported over 59% of college students had been drunk in the past.

Bloomington is a town where drinking and partying are omnipresent, especially for college students. Kirkwood Avenue, downtown's central roadway with a wide variety of bars, is packed almost every night with people wandering between bars or drinking in the street.

"After midnight you tend to see a lot of extremely inebriated people," Luke Van Den Eeden, IU student and bouncer at Brothers Bar and Grill, said. "Social life in Bloomington involves a lot of alcohol."

"The party culture here in Bloomington seems mildly unsafe, so when I go out I don't go out by myself," local Alyssa Gartner said while bar hopping following the homecoming football game in October. "Indiana University is known for being one of the largest party colleges in the world." Ceremonies and celebrations are just excuses for crowds of people to get wildly drunk, IU

junior Abby Blomer said. She hadn't had a drop of alcohol until the day she graduated from high school, but her drinking became a problem when she started attending IU.

"My first year was awful: there were no in-person classes, I was stuck in this tiny dorm by myself and I felt like the only thing entertaining I could do was alcohol," Blomer said. "When you don't have any responsibilities, it's fine to drink Friday, Saturday, and Sunday if that's your regular party weekend."

For Larsen, smoking began as a social event but soon became an escape from schoolwork and other responsibilities.

"I spent every day high," Larsen said. "I kind of had a job but not really, my family wasn't supporting me financially anymore, I'd wake up every morning worried about what I'd get yelled at for next. But I thought I was happy because I was high."

The simple act of walking across campus is enough to remind Larsen of his struggles to avoid marijuana since the smell of the drug is strong, distinguishable and common. Although marijuana possession is illegal in Indiana, many local dispensaries are legally able to sell versions of the product with a small enough amount of THC concentration, commonly known as Delta 8.

Larsen found it difficult to quit smoking for the sake of others, and he was unwilling to seek recovery until he wanted it for himself. This is common for many people in Narcotics Anonymous, Larsen said.



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1. A large road sign is used while Kirkwood is closed to remind visitors that open alcohol is illegal to have in public settings. People often hop between bars along Kirkwood, bringing with them their drinks.

2. The instructions and tools Larsen uses to make his models sit out on his kitchen table as he works on his most recent ones. They often come with dozens of parts he individually assembles.

3. Larsen looks at the individual weapons and pieces he has yet to cut out and assemble on one of his recent models. He said it takes time, but he enjoys the focus it takes to build them.

4. One of Larsen's most recent models is a small Gundam figurine. Larsen said a model of this size would only take a few hours to build.



A group of women dance along a closed Kirkwood Avenue after exiting Kilroy's on Kirkwood, one of the most popular bars in Bloomington. Just after 9 p.m., the bars are filling up as lines to get in grow longer.

Larsen said he became convinced to quit marijuana one morning when he found himself smoking a bowl in front of an open window seemingly without a care in the world.

"It was 9 a.m. in the morning, I'm sitting on the couch with the blinds completely open. I'm sitting there, in my underwear, and I'm smoking a bowl. Some form of clarity came to me in that moment and I realized it was the beginning of the day and I'm practically naked, on display for anyone walking by and we live next to a relatively busy road, and I'm smoking, doing something that is illegal in this state," Larsen said. "That was the first time I ever really felt true shame for drug use, and I realized that maybe things need to change."

The road to recovery looks different for everyone, Lindsay Potts, director of Behavioral Health Services for IU Health Bloomington, said.

"Recovery is any action toward growth. There are thousands of ways for people to live in recovery," Potts said. "Therapy, group therapy and peer support offer resources to individuals to find their path forward."

IU Health's Addiction Treatment and Recovery Centers treat addiction as a symptom of other issues, Supervisor Andrea Cheek said. Their recovery program encompasses a six to eight week intensive outpatient care course which often involves multiple weekly meetings and check-ups. Following this program, patients go through a less intensive aftercare program for two to three months.

"We try to help patients build a support network and help them replace drugs with something more positive," Cheek said. "Abusing a substance can become a relationship for some people, so

without something to fill in the gap of that relationship relapses become more likely."

Larsen attends weekly Narcotics Anonymous meetings and works with the Collegiate Recovery Community to connect with others who are avoiding substance abuse on and around campus. The NA meetings, he said, are more rigorous and include a wider variety of people, but the CRC offers a space for IU students and allows them to talk about their experiences while they were using.

Getting clean was not a simple process for Larsen. To avoid the temptation of using, he began spending more time with friends he made through his connections in the recovery community and stopped seeing people whose relationship with him was based solely on their mutual drug usage.



Larsen's Narcotics Anonymous book sits among his models and supplies, idle on the apartment's kitchen table. He said some of the testimonials and stories in the book are harrowing.

"There were many, many relapses between my decision to get clean and my first long stint of sobriety," Larsen said. "I decided for myself that I wanted my life to be better, I wanted to go to school, that I didn't want to work at Arby's anymore. It was a good job, but it was not conducive to a clean mindset."

Students who seek recovery often do so at the behest of others, such as friends or family, Cheek said. These patients tend to be less self-motivated in their recovery, which can be an impediment in their sobriety.

Larsen and Blomer found it difficult to pursue recovery without an internal motivation. Blomer chose to seek recovery because she found she didn't like the person she was becoming when she drank.

"I had this intense fear of coming down from being drunk so I would just continue drinking as the night went on. A lot of things happened that I didn't remember, someone told me that I kissed someone, a lot of specific things I did that very much were not me, that didn't reflect who

I was," Blomer said. "That was when I realized that I couldn't keep doing this."

Recovering from high drug usage is not a linear process and being in recovery isn't as black and white as either being dependent or completely abstinent from a substance, Blomer said. People like her favor an approach she calls being "sober-ish" which is the gradual process of weaning off of problematic substances without quitting outright.

For others like Larsen, seeking sobriety is a goal which supersedes all others. In his pursuit of recovering from marijuana addiction he has cut ties with friends and significant others who he felt wouldn't be conducive to his recovery. His most recent relapse occurred when he was drunk, so he quit drinking altogether to eliminate one more route to relapse.

"There is a scale of relapsing that ranges from someone using one time after months of sobriety or to someone falling back into dependence," Larsen said. "I'm not taking the risk either way. For me, my recovery relies on being completely sober."



Larsen sits in front of CRCS Program Coordinator Samantha Reitz's desk as they wait for more people to arrive. Sometimes they'll have a group of three or four, other times it's just one person.