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February 9, 2026

## Straight Talk

Welcome to the latest edition of the **Steered Straight Newsletter**—and to a defining moment in our mission.

As we move boldly into 2026, our purpose remains clear but more urgent than ever: to educate, inspire, and empower young people to make positive, life-changing choices. That mission hasn't changed—but it has intensified. And we have no plans of stopping.

Across the country, Michael DeLeon and the Steered Straight team continue to stand on the front lines, reaching communities, families, and young people who need truth, hope, and direction now more than ever. This year, Michael has even more reason to fight—and that fight fuels everything we do.

We are deeply grateful to have you with us on this journey. Your support makes this work possible, and in 2026, we are asking you to stand with Michael, with Steered Straight, and with every life we are committed to impacting. Together, we will continue to inform, educate, and inspire—relentlessly.



### **Straight Talk: This Isn't About Experimentation — It's About Coping**

Not all substance use is the same — and January is when the difference matters most.

Many adults assume teens “experiment” socially: trying something once or twice, then moving on. That’s not always the case. After winter break and with the school year halfway done, some teens are using substances to *cope* — to manage stress, boredom, anxiety, or emotional letdown.

Coping-driven use is quieter, more planned, and easier to hide. It doesn’t show up at parties or on social media. It shows up in subtle changes: irritability, fatigue, withdrawal, or emotional numbing. By the time consequences appear, the behavior is already entrenched.

If you’re only asking, “Are they using?” you’re missing the bigger question: *Why are they using?*

This is the January risk that adults consistently underestimate. It’s invisible, it’s gradual, and it’s exactly the type of behavior that slips under the radar during the “normal” school year.

The window to notice and respond is now — before coping-driven use turns into a pattern that’s much harder to interrupt.

**On the blog, I break down the difference between experimentation and coping-driven use, how to spot the early signs, and practical steps adults can take to intervene early — without shaming, panicking, or overreacting.**

**- Michael DeLeon**

**Founder, Steered Straight**

## Road Warrior



## How the Miles Make a Difference

My boss, Michael DeLeon of Steered Straight was the guest speaker this evening at the CASA of Warren County mtg. Love anytime we get to team up with great people like Judge Ryan J. Moore & Debbie Hughes Helton ... thank you for having us! Ya'll, CASA is full of amazing humans advocating for the children of our community! So glad we are on the same team! 🍷

[steeredstraight.com](https://steeredstraight.com)

#CASA #vapingprevention #advocate #WarrenCountyTN #childrensadvocacy #drugprevention

#volunteer

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# In The News

## Trump's cannabis rescheduling order was just smoke

Even with an order to expedite the process, federal cannabis reform faces long delays and legal hurdles

By **RUSSELL PAYNE**  
Staff Reporter

In December, President **Donald Trump** directed the Department of Justice to fast-track the rescheduling of cannabis, a move that could open doors for research and cut red tape for businesses and consumers. Now the move is

looking more like a public relations play than anything else, with opponents within the administration and the conservative movement gearing up for a fight as advocates for rescheduling say they expect it to take years — or decades — to resolve.

Under the Controlled Substances Act, enacted by former President Richard Nixon, drugs are **sorted** into five different categories or schedules based, at least theoretically, on the risk they pose for harm or addictiveness versus their potential for medical use. Schedule I drugs are the most tightly controlled and allegedly dangerous substances, including heroin, LSD and marijuana, whereas Schedule V drugs like Lyrica are seen as less harmful in the eyes of the government.

As it stands, marijuana extracts from the cannabis plant are lumped into Schedule I, which makes it incredibly **complicated** and **expensive** to study the drug and adds all sorts of other restrictions, such as **preventing banks** from working with cannabis companies. However, on December 18, Trump ordered that “The Attorney General shall take all necessary steps to complete the rulemaking process related to rescheduling marijuana to Schedule III of the CSA in the most expeditious manner.” This would, in theory, remove much of the red tape surrounding a plant-based drug that is enjoyed by **nearly** 20 million Americans regularly in states that have repealed anti-cannabis laws, conflicting with federal law.

The order drew headlines at a moment when Trump was escalating a **military conflict with Venezuela** and facing a fast-approaching deadline for the release of the **Epstein files** related to convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, in which the president was named thousands of times. Now, however,

it's clear that, at least when it comes to this order, language like "most expeditious manner," doesn't necessarily mean that anything is changing anytime soon.

Paul Armentano, the deputy director of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML), a cannabis legal advocacy group, told Salon that he expects rescheduling to take years, or longer.

"I've been on the record for the last three years or so, making it very clear that this is designed to be a very long and drawn-out process," Armentano said. "When you look back historically at previous rescheduling petitions, of which there have been numerous ones, they have all taken many years until they've reached their resolution. And in fact, the longest rescheduling petition, which was filed by NORML in 1972 was not resolved until 1994. So we're talking a span of multiple decades from the initiation of that petition until its conclusion."

Almost immediately after marijuana was made illegal, people have **pushed** for the repeal of these laws, arguing that cannabis-based drugs are far safer and less addictive than alcohol and tobacco, which are not scheduled at all. With the exception of 24 states that have loosened cannabis laws for recreational use, federal law has remained relatively rigid on weed. The current rescheduling push dates back to October of 2022, when former President Joe Biden directed the Department of Health and Human Services to **reexamine cannabis's scheduling status**. The government is currently in the middle of the formal **rulemaking** process, which is handled both by the Drug Enforcement Administration and HHS.

Part of the reason that the rulemaking process takes so long, Armentano explained, is that it's designed to take an indefinite

amount of time, at least if concerned parties, whether they be inside or outside the government, have the will and resources to force it to.

“If parties want to drag this process out, the mechanisms exist within the administrative process that allow them to do so nearly indefinitely,” Armentano said. “Again, that’s not a bug. That’s the way the process was designed.”

Inside the administration, the move has enemies like Attorney General Pam Bondi, a long-time **opponent** of cannabis reform and supporter of continued **criminalization**, who is charged with overseeing the process. As recently as the first Trump administration, when Bondi was still a Florida attorney general, she sat on an opioid crisis board that **argued** both that cannabis was a gateway drug to opioids and that cannabis use in the 2010s was akin to opioid use in the early 2000s, a problem waiting to explode. The evidence for cannabis as a gateway drug is **poor** to **nonexistent**, due to research barriers, including its Schedule I status.

Congressional Republicans are also pushing to keep cannabis on Schedule I, with Sen. James Lankford R-Okla., and Sen. Tedd Budd, R-N.C., attempting, albeit unsuccessfully, to slip language into a 2026 funding bill that would strip the executive branch of the power to **reschedule** cannabis specifically. Former allies of Trump are also gearing up for a prolonged legal battle, with the president’s **former Attorney General Bill Barr** joining the legal team of one of the leading anti-cannabis groups, Smart Approaches to Marijuana, which has supported the continued criminalization of cannabis since 2013.

Notably, cannabis arrests still make up the bulk of all arrests related to drugs, with more than 200,000 people arrested

nationwide in 2024, mostly for possession. Even in some states that have legalized adult-use cannabis, like Illinois, cannabis arrests still make up about a third of all drug-related arrests.

The focus on rescheduling, for those in the cannabis industry, also represents doubling down on a regulatory framework that doesn't reflect the way that cannabis is used in the country, nor the risk it poses to users. And, it keeps barriers up to give corporations the upper hand in the industry.

"I don't think rescheduling is the answer. I think **descheduling** is actually the answer. We just haven't got there yet," Corey Coleman, who co-founded Sky High Brands and founded the Iowa Hemp Coalition.

Coleman highlighted the arbitrary nature of cannabis and hemp regulation, two versions of the same plant but with differing intoxicating effects, subject to wildly different regulations. It's all based on an arbitrary legal definition related to the potency of a specific THC compound in the dried flower of the plant, as an example of the byzantine rules in the industry, which can stand to benefit big business.

"I think it's a step in the right direction. You know, the biggest fear with Schedule III then is, you know, it pushes things more towards Big Pharma or the major corporations, making it harder for the smaller business operators that actually started this industry," Coleman said.

In response to a request for comment from Salon, a Justice Department official said "DOJ is working to identify the most expeditious means of executing the EO."

By **RUSSELL PAYNE**

Russell Payne is a staff reporter for Salon. His reporting has previously appeared in The New York Sun and the Finger Lakes Times.

## On the Road to Recovery

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### Stacie Burns: From Addiction to Advocacy — A Story of Resilience and Purpose

Behind every community movement is a personal story — and in the world of addiction recovery advocacy, few are as heartfelt or inspiring as that of **Stacie “Staci” Burns**, founder and president of *Drug Free All Stars*.

Staci’s path was not straightforward. Like many caught in the grip of substance use disorder, she faced some of the darkest depths of addiction before finding a way out. Her turning point came after years of struggle, including intense heroin addiction and countless attempts at treatment. It was a moment of clarity — lying on a bathroom floor and recognizing she had only two possible futures: continued suffering or recovery. That realization ultimately led her to give sobriety one more real chance, and this time it stuck.

Her own journey to recovery wasn’t simple, and she doesn’t sugarcoat that reality. Still, after decades of heroin use and more than a dozen rehab

attempts, she found a path that worked — including incorporating **medication-assisted treatment (MAT)** with methadone into her recovery. Rather than hiding that part of her story, Staci has used it to break down the shame and misconceptions that still exist in many recovery circles.

Through her early recovery, Staci saw two critical truths:

- **No two paths to recovery look alike.** What worked for her may not work for others — and that's okay.
- **Stigma kills as many people as drugs do.** When people feel judged for their chosen recovery path, many walk away from help altogether.

That insight became the foundation for *Drug Free All Stars*, a grassroots advocacy group based in Michigan that challenges misconceptions, fights stigma, and supports people across all pathways of recovery. In addition to leading the organization, Staci is a **Certified Peer Recovery Coach, Certified Narcan Trainer, motivational speaker**, and even hosts a **radio talk show** where she shares stories, resources, and encouragement with listeners who might feel alone in their journey.

Staci also uses her voice in policy and community settings; she's served on advisory boards and worked to bring recovery perspectives into legislative conversations, ensuring that people in recovery — and the professionals who support them — have a seat at the table.

But for Staci, advocacy isn't just policy work — it's personal. She teaches her children kindness and empathy, encouraging them to see people for who they are, not their past mistakes. She often says that her greatest accomplishments aren't awards or titles — but **living proof that recovery is possible** and that every person deserves dignity and a second chance.

Today, Staci's mission goes beyond one community or one demographic. She believes that families, schools, and communities all play a role in prevention and support. Through *Drug Free All Stars*, she amplifies voices that have often been ignored — the people who have looked fear in the face and **chose recovery over despair**. Her story reminds us that recovery isn't a destination, it's a community effort — and that every life regained is a victory.

To hear her story in her own words please click the photo and link below.

To see more stories of hope and inspiration please visit:

[www.recoveryarmy.com](http://www.recoveryarmy.com)



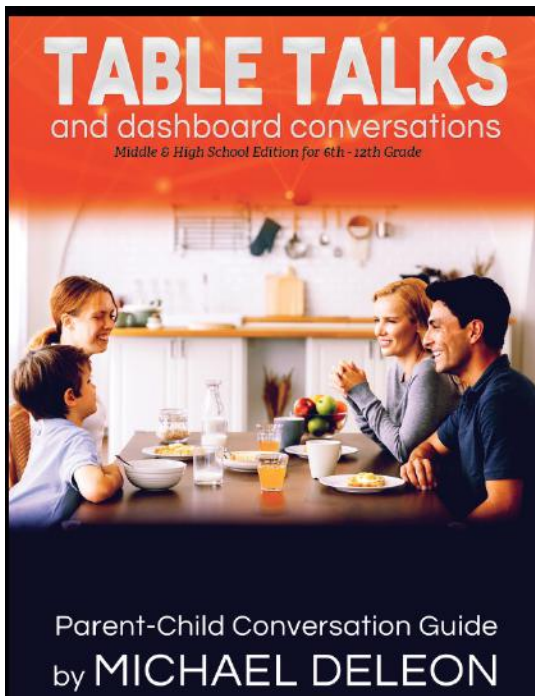
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## TABLE TALKS

Michael has created workbooks for parents and children that guide them in managing relationships and discussing difficult topics beyond drug and alcohol abuse. Each month, he focuses on a different subjects and offers many different topics of conversation and activities you can do with your children to help foster that deep connection and communication that is so vital.



**Table Talks and Dashboard Conversations** is an in-depth conversation guide for parents and kids. You can order through [Amazon](#) or the [Steered Straight website](#).



## **The Month of February: Marijuana**

Marijuana has become a household word, just like alcohol. It is easily accessible and in many states is legal to use for recreational purposes as well as medicinal. Again, just like alcohol, it is only legal for those 21 years of age and older, yet it is being used by many who are younger than that. Marijuana has over 400 chemicals in it and, especially when used by someone whose brain is still developing, it can have devastating, permanently brain-altering effects.

Marijuana is often sold to kids as “just a plant” — something natural and harmless. But that’s not the full story. Marijuana contains over 400 chemical compounds, and when it’s smoked or vaped, it produces many of the same toxins and irritants found in tobacco smoke. Today’s marijuana is also far more potent than in the past, with high THC levels that can interfere with memory, motivation, focus, and mental health — especially in developing teen brains.

“Natural” doesn’t mean safe. Tobacco is natural. So is poison ivy. What matters is what it does to the body.

This is a conversation parents can’t avoid. Talk with your kids. Ask what they’ve heard. Share the facts. Make sure they understand that marijuana isn’t just a harmless plant — it’s a mind-altering drug with real risks, and their growing brains deserve protection.

Please educate yourself and have these valuable conversations with your kids. It can literally change their lives. Spend this week connecting, educating, and building your kids up. The more we open up with them, the more they will open up to the important adults in their lives.

## Headlines We Are Following

[Why governor abbott charging \\$25,000 for a petition list should concern every texan and what the thc veto was really about](#)

[How marijuana legalization opened the door for cartels the warning Colorado ignored](#)

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## Contact Steered Straight

Michael and his team of professional Steered Straight speakers are eager to meet you in person and make a profound impact on your students, staff, and community. To bring their inspiring message to your next event, contact Steered Straight to schedule.

[CONTACT STEERED STRAIGHT](#)

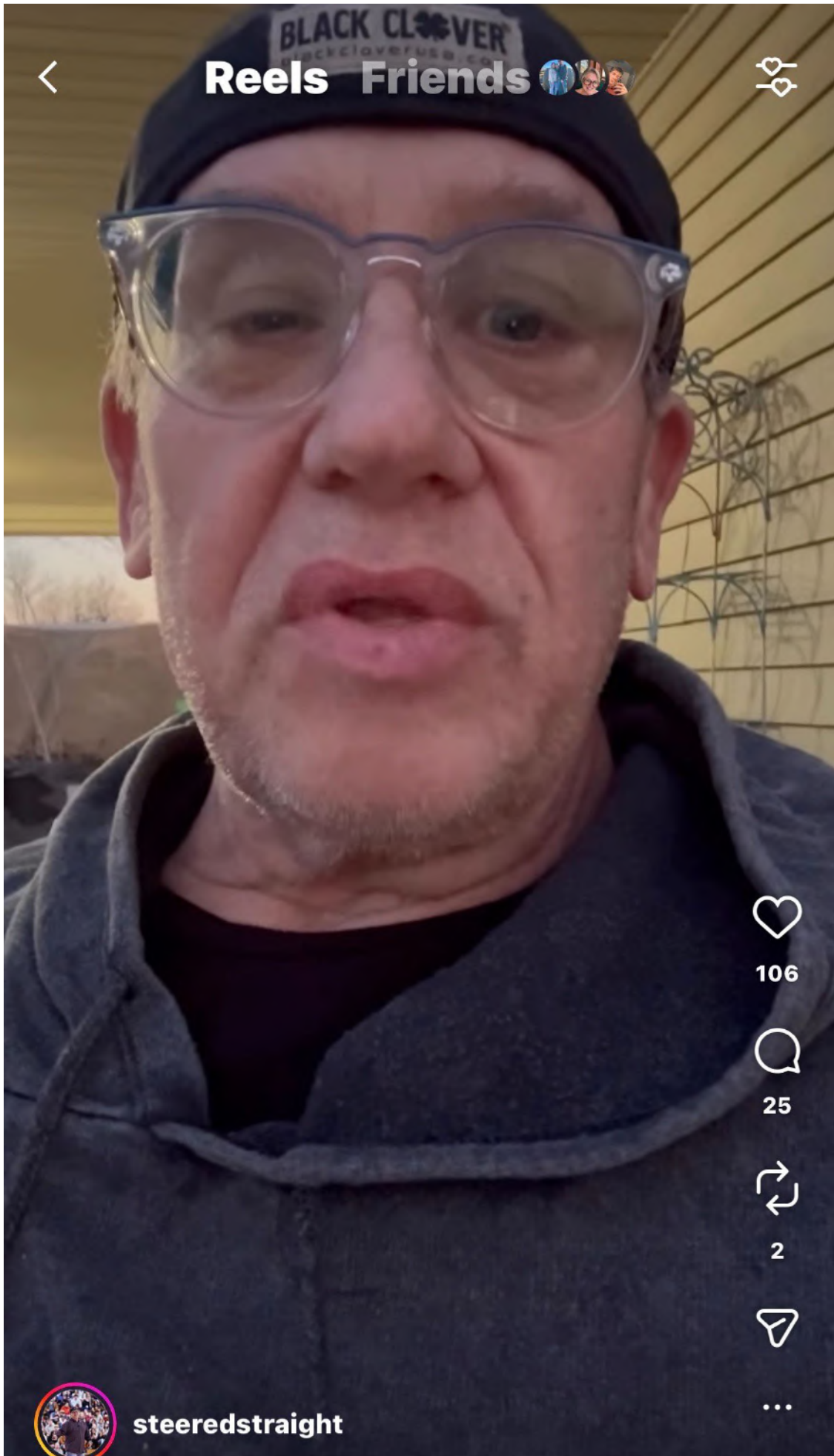


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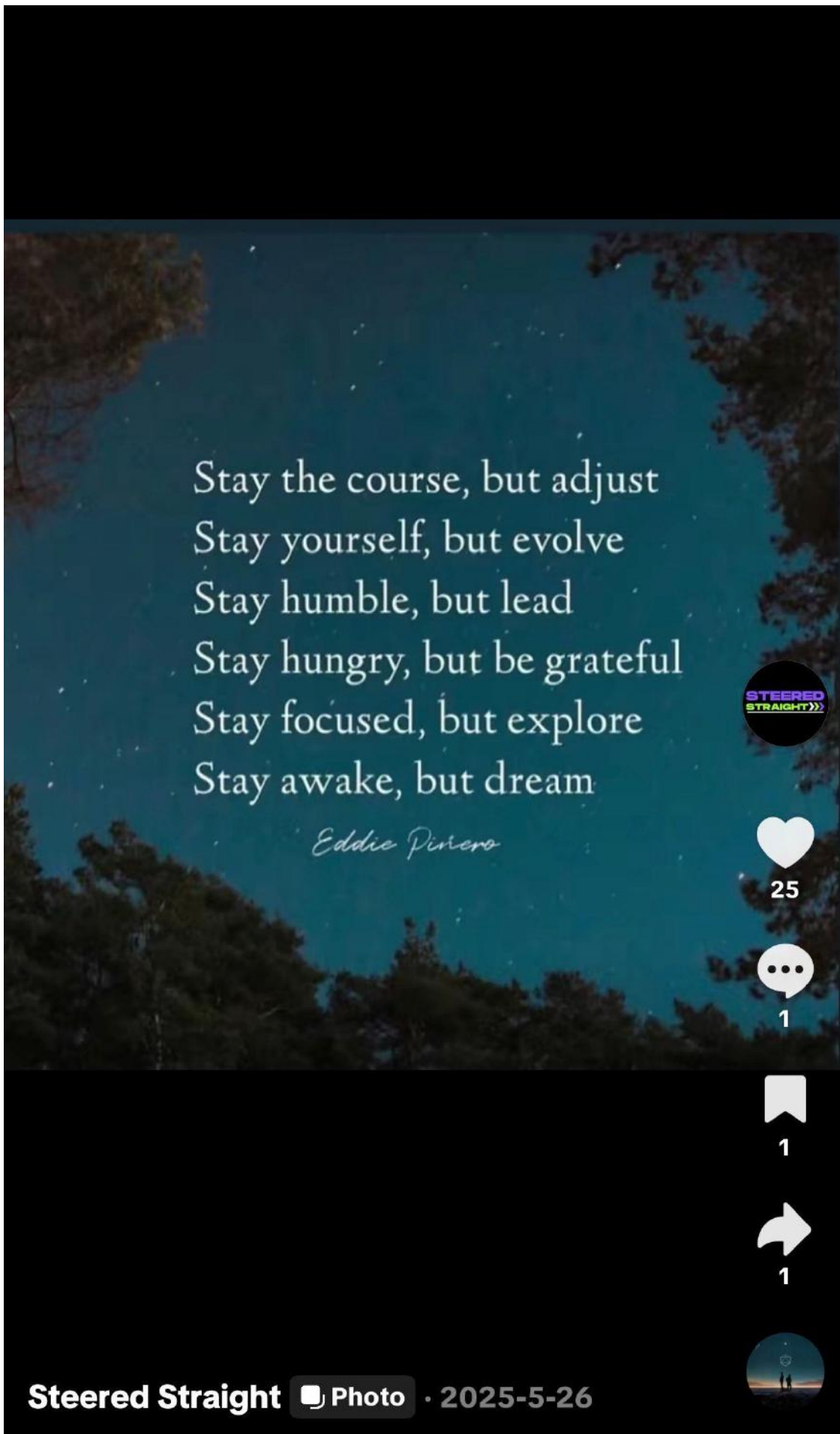
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Fighting the Cancer Battle and I WILL WIN!!!!





Watch now on TikTok

@steeredstraight

**Click on the photo to view the post!**

This Instagram post is one worth the click! Michael shares how illicit drugs led to a third time cancer diagnosis but more-so he shares his struggle and determination to BEAT THIS DISEASE. Michael has been in recovery for many years but the effects of the past are rearing their ugly head. Thankfully this was caught extremely early! As Michael undergoes chemo he is experiencing chemo fatigue but he is never too wiped out to keep sharing and educating. He is never too wiped out to continue his mission of ensuring no child goes down this same path if he can help it! Please share your kind words, thoughts, and prayers with Michael and he kicks cancer's butt!

TikTok is a reminder of some of the vapes that Michael has been given from courageous students choosing to change their lives for the better.

Michael DeLeon and the team at Steered Straight are working hard to ensure this generation gets what they need to change the world. No other program like it and no one delivers the message better. All for the kids! Follow Michael and Steered Straight on social media so you don't miss a beat!

#steeredstraight #motivator #explore #advice #drugfree #antivaping #recovery #quitvaping #stayinyourlane





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