



# FINGERPRINT

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## In Conversation with Austin Norris '17

by Bruce McKinnon '90

### THE BACKSTORY

**Me:** Wait a sec. Did you just say you used to be homeless? In this neighborhood? Can we include that in the article?

**Austin:** Yeah. Sure... but really, I was just an obnoxious, rebellious teenager who chose the city streets over life in the 'burbs.

*When I met up with Austin Norris on a sunny afternoon in late September, we chatted on a bench beside a basketball court, next to a housing project near Queen & Spadina. His clinic is located in a building right next to where we sat. Austin knows the area well. But he has also known another side of this 'hood.*

As a teenager I really struggled with substance abuse and managed to get wrapped up in a lot of trouble pretty quickly. By age 16, I regularly chose to spend more time on the streets in Toronto than at my parents' place in the suburbs. So I'd be spending 3 or 4 days at a time downtown. Near here. Ironically, my old local shelter is just down the alleyway here, across from my clinic.

At age 18, my incredibly reckless lifestyle caught up with me. After a series of troublesome events, I found myself at a crossroads. It was time to deal with my demons before they dealt with me.

### AND YOU CHOSE CLEAN

Before drugs took over my life, I was in incredible physical shape. After experiencing such a rapid decline in my health, I decided to get back into fitness and pursue a career in personal training. I moved into the city and found a place at Gerrard & Jarvis, a very affordable student housing co-op. Despite the bugs and rodents, it served as a foundation to build my new life from. I attended George Brown College (Casa Loma Campus) for Fitness and Lifestyle Management, graduating in 2010. While I was at George Brown, I interviewed at almost every GoodLife studio in Toronto (I had to master the interview process), and finally scored a full-time position as a personal trainer at GoodLife Fitness at Yonge & St. Clair.



I intentionally took on so much work and school that I was too busy for drugs, too busy for trouble. I felt I had a lot of catching up to do, and a lot to prove. I cut everybody out of my life when I moved and kept my nose to the grindstone. I finally learned how to apply myself and graduated at the top of my class. By 20 years old, I was a successful and self-employed personal trainer in Rosedale.

## **WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOURSELF AS A LIFE-LONG LEARNER?**

Yes. This has been a more recent and empowering realization. Looking at the last 12 years, I've consistently been enrolled in some form of education program. My journey has directed me into the realms of fitness, therapeutic exercise, physical rehab, manual therapy, functional neuroscience, and osteopathic movement therapy.

Physical rehabilitation has always been a theme in my practice. Drug addiction left my body riddled with injuries and postural imbalances. I had fractured something on every limb, suffered from daily chronic pain, and had terrible posture by the age of 18. I was literally forced to rehabilitate myself before I could focus on physical fitness and helping others.

This really helped me develop in my practice. Most young trainers in the commercial fitness industry have athletic backgrounds. My own experiences and rehabilitation allowed me to develop the confidence to take on personal training clients that other trainers didn't want to take on: those with debilitating pain, poor posture, complicated injury history, chronic illness, and other potential health issues.

## **WHAT LED YOU TO MASSAGE THERAPY?**

In 2014 I started studying Neurokinetic Therapy (NKT), a technique to identify structures in the body that are compensating for each other. While NKT brought my skills to a new level, I realized that the full potential of my movement therapy practice was limited by my lack of manual therapy skills. I realized that I had to become a therapist and decided I would take the steps to go back to school for massage therapy. I wanted to broaden my scope of practice to be able to include manual therapy with my movement work.

*Sutherland-Chan proved a good fit for Austin. Most of his training clients had appointments very early in the morning or later in the evening and there was a window during the day to devote to other activities... like massage school. Coincidentally, at the time he lived basically next door to the school.*

Some of my best decisions have been made out of intuitive impulse. I was living at Spadina & Dupont, and one summer day I made the impulsive decision to collect my transcripts from George Brown and drop into Sutherland-Chan, to see how many transfer credits I could qualify for. As it turned out, the summer Bridge program was starting the very next week and I wound up a part of it. Our group joined the second-year class in the fall.

After my experience at George Brown, I was once again willing to juggle full-time school and my personal training practice. I'd be in the gym as early as 6:00 a.m. and then race over to school from Yonge & Summerhill for 9:00 a.m. When classes finished, I'd be back to the gym again until 10:00 in the evening. I was constantly throttling burnout, often falling asleep in class, but it was totally worth it.

## HOW HAS YOUR FITNESS AND MOVEMENT PRACTICE EVOLVED?

The transition to include massage therapy into my practice was pretty straightforward. Because I was already working as a personal trainer at Fusion Health Studio and as a posture coach at Aches Away Massage Therapy, I basically had a position as an RMT waiting for me when I graduated.

Massage therapy has allowed me to expand the scope of my practice exactly as I had intended. I can integrate movement and manual therapy in ways to best serve my patients. I took on a position as a Functional Movement Specialist and RMT at Pure Motion Centre, a dedicated physical rehab space operated by some of my favourite mentors, Amy Theiu, PT and Dr. Amanda Moore, DC.

I was already well-educated and well-established professionally before my studies at S-C, but my massage training has really allowed me to fully integrate my various fields of study, to be able to help a wider variety of more complex patients. So, over the last 12 years my work has become an integrated practice that includes osteopathic movement therapy, functional neuroscience therapy, physical conditioning and now, massage therapy.

In January 2019, I finally opened my own clinic, Primal Motion, here at Queen & Spadina. I have created the perfect space where I can easily offer treatments that integrate massage therapy, physical rehab and personal training.

## TAKING CARE OF SELF

*And then there's self-care. When he's not at work, Austin feeds his love of movement, music, and dance by keeping up a varied regimen of intense, physically demanding "leisure activities." He has a dedicated aerial straps circus practice, trains Krav Maga twice a week, and as a total counterpoint, recently began taking ballet classes.*

I have three physical practices outside of work. My outlet for creative expression of movement is Aerial Straps. I hope to start performing next year and I spend as much as 20 hours a week training circus. It's a really beautiful way to showcase both strength and grace.

For metabolic conditioning and to develop practical self-defense skills, I also practice Krav Maga. It's a form of self-defense best known for its association with the Israeli special defense forces. Krav Maga is very tactical. It teaches you the most effective techniques to protect yourself in real-life combat situations. It serves me beautifully as an outlet to help manage the stress of my very fast-paced life.

And I've recently taken up ballet. Ballet is helping me improve my mobility and aesthetic for circus, while developing a very precise sense of body awareness.

I very much enjoy the differences between these movement practices. Krav Maga is aggressive, powerful, almost reckless. Ballet is delicate, precise, and graceful. Aerial Straps integrates the two: it's a display of strength and grace.



## ONE THING LEADS TO ANOTHER

*Austin has been able to develop a solid reputation as a therapist within the circus and performing arts community.*

Being actively involved in the circus community for several years, I have had the opportunity to work with many incredible circus artists. It has helped me to establish myself as reputable member of the community to consult with regarding rehab, training, and massage therapy.

Earlier this year I was scouted by the lead choreographer of a new Netflix series, *Tiny Pretty Things*. Based on a novel, TPT features the trials and tribulations of life in an elite ballet school. During filming in Toronto between August and December 2019, I was the primary consultant for massage therapy, personal training, and rehab for the main cast, all of whom are professional ballet dancers.

So now I'm in a position where about 75% of my private practice is working with professional performing artists.



## WHAT'S NEXT?

*Austin is considering applying to Thompson River University for a BSc Health Sciences degree. Depending on prior qualifications, they offer a 'bridge' option to transition into the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> year of the program.*

I realize with all of the college and continuing education courses I've taken, I still don't have an undergrad! Con-ed will always be a part of my life and a degree could open up more options in the future.

However, after spending most of my 20s getting educated, and recently turning 30, I've set the intention to shift my focus, to be an entrepreneur. I'd like to facilitate a lifestyle that allows me to be both wealthy and a life-long learner.

In January 2013, I established Primal Motion ([www.primalmotion.com](http://www.primalmotion.com)) in an attempt to brand my integrated practice as "Mastering Movement as Nature Intended." It's been a journey, refining my private practice to calibrate the musculoskeletal system as it was designed to operate, and that has been enhanced by having established this new physical space to host my practice, here at Queen & Spadina.

In January 2020, my partner and I will be launching CirQular Motion ([www.cirquarmotion.com](http://www.cirquarmotion.com)), a new venture based on the principle of "Mastering Movement for Performing Artists." A clinic by day and a group exercise studio in the evening, it will serve as a hub for performing artists to fulfill their manual therapy, movement therapy, and cross-training needs. It will host private practitioners who have a passion for working with performing artists, and will offer a group exercise curriculum

to complement the needs of these artists. Classes will include themes such as “Prehab for Aerialists”, “Calisthenics for Acrobats”, “Active Flexibility for Contortionists”, etc.

Basically we want to create a space within the circus school where athletes can do cross-training relative to their art, improve performance, and reduce the risk of injury. CirQular Motion will be located inside Studio Flux, an established circus collective space at Carlaw & Lakeshore.

## CODA

I’m often asked how I keep up with it all. My mentors often warn me about burnout, but at this point in my life I’ve come to accept that I am just wired this way. I’d rather keep myself busy and focus on achieving my dreams than allow myself to get bored and, ultimately, into trouble.

If I don’t run away with the circus or have a family by 40, I have a subtle feeling that I’ll pursue another career shift. In medicine.


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