

BARTHOLOMEW JAMES LOWER

“Look around,” Lower instructed as we walked, constantly pointing at one empty structure after another with the same sighing recognition one uses when seeing high school yearbook pictures of friends who’ve died since graduation.

“See the signs — ‘For Rent,’ ‘Available.’ That building’s empty. That one’s for sale. That one just switched hands again. See that green building? That used to be my in-laws, and it was a bar they ended up closing because of the economy. This whole corner building has been vacant for a decade. That one on the corner that kind of looks like a bank? That’s been vacant for a decade too. That one there? Empty. That one? Empty.” He stopped on a corner for a moment to take it all in. “Truck through downtown Ionia, and this is the rest of the country. The big cities are the big cities, but what you see here is the rest of the country.”

Lower has a very personal relationship with one of the town's drug abusers. When Nicole's son was 16, she and Lower learned he wasn't just using drugs. He was starting to deal them as well. A line had been crossed and Lower truly believed that “if you can't hold people accountable in your own family, how can you expect to do it on a national or global level?” So, they turned their own child over to police custody.

I had no idea how to respond. We're so conditioned as parents to protect our children no matter what. The idea of handing them over to someone else for punishment seems unnatural. We preach tough love because it sounds good, especially when it's about someone else's children. I like to think that everything I've ever done for my son, this current journey of mine in particular, has been done to inspire him to do the right things—rather than scare him into avoiding the wrong things. And here was a man who felt the same way, yet still handed his oldest child over to the authorities.

He had his reasons. The way Lower saw it, “when kids are under 17, you have a window where you're trying to make a change that doesn't end up hurting them the rest of their lives. He couldn't follow the probation, so I finally looked at the judge and said, ‘He needs real consequences.’”

Candidates talk all the time about their willingness to make tough decisions. Well, they don't come any tougher than this one and Lower made it. He let his son go to a detention center for 90 days in order to start weaning himself off drugs. The decision definitely strained his relationship with the now 18-year-old. But I didn't sense an ounce of regret from Lower.