

# Carmine's Second Act FINAL

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

COVID-19 pandemic, mental health, catheter surgery, police stereotypes, journalist follow-up, Korean origin, comedy career, drug addiction, rehab program, fentanyl overdoses, family support, medical coma, ventilator scar, catering business, comedy workshop

## SPEAKERS

Yanika Saluja, News montage, Christina Fontana, Chantelle Krupka, David, Jelena Vermilion, Comedy Club Announcer, Gabrielle McMann, Carmine Posteraro, Noel Tesfa, Vanessa Tiberio, Unnamed Voice

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- Y** Yanika Saluja 00:05

This is We Met U When... a podcast by journalism students at Toronto Metropolitan University. I'm your host, Yanika Saluja, we go back in time, dig up news stories from the past, and track down the people in those stories. Usually we go back 10 years, but this season, we're going back to 2020. The World Health Organization declared COVID-19, a global pandemic. It was a time of lockdowns, global protests, disruption around the world, and it affected all of us in different ways.
- G** Gabrielle McMann 00:45

During COVID, like we weren't allowed to gather. We weren't allowed to come together for powwows. And I think many people's spirits and their mental health kind of felt that.
- C** Carmine Posteraro 00:56

You know, I woke up, I had a catheter in me. I had a colostomy bag in my backside. It was just like intense. I couldn't move like my you know, I didn't move for 12 days. My muscles were all deteriorated. I got this scar.
- C** Chantelle Krupka 01:08

I'm not all the things that they like to stereotype us as, and I was still almost killed by the police. And so, like, I'm trying to say that they use those stereotypes as an excuse to devalue us.

**Y** Yanika Saluja 01:23  
We want to know what happened after their names were in the news.

**J** Jelena Vermilion 01:28  
I've had journalists like, reach out after to follow up on a different story, but not not. I've never once had a journalist be like, Hey, are you okay? I sell those comments. I want to check in like, no, not once, not one time.

**Y** Yanika Saluja 01:41  
No one was in a position of power, but many of them felt the power a news story can have. We're exploring what's changed and what hasn't.

**U** Unnamed Voice 01:52  
Chloe. Can I say something? Is it fair to say that you're of Korean origin?

**N** Noel Tesfa 01:58  
It's a heavy thing to talk about. But I think it's also very important. This is something that people need to hear.

**Y** Yanika Saluja 02:07  
We're also thinking about the difference we journalists can make going forward by first going back to 2020. You're listening to We Met U When... season three. This is Carmine's Second Act.

**C** Comedy Club Announcer 02:31  
Okay, well, this is we got our final comedian on the night. Y'all ready for this? I think they are, everybody please welcome Carmine Posteraro.

**C** Carmine Posteraro 02:46  
What's up, Welland? How you doing? The W dot. This place used to be a nightclub. Used to be called Times Square Rocks, and she rocked. You know I was just thinking when I was on my way here, if you would have told me 20 years ago, when I was in that bathroom sniffing cocaine, that one day I'd be up here telling jokes, I would have said, "You're crazy." And then I would ask you if you wanted to buy some coke. Sorry, Ma.

V Vanessa Tiberio 03:20

That's Carmine posteraro. He's performing in his hometown Welland, Ontario. It's about a 25 minute drive for Niagara Falls on the Canadian side, population just over 50,000 it kind of feels like everybody knows each other here, but only a few people in this audience know all that Carmine's been through. In 2020 he caught COVID and was fighting for his life.

C Carmine Posteraro 03:47

It was crazy experience, you know, I woke up. I had a catheter in me. I had a colostomy bag in my backside. It was just like intense. I couldn't move like my you know, I didn't move for 12 days. My muscles were all deteriorated. I got this scar.

V Vanessa Tiberio 04:00

Carmine was 39 years old and spent 12 days in a coma. The Toronto Star covered that story back in 2020, but when we met up with Carmine, you were just as amazed by all he'd been through before catching COVID. That story starts in university. Carmine played football. He was a center on the offensive line, and just when his football career started taking off, he got injured. Carmine tore two ligaments, his ACL and PCL in his right knee. He needed surgery. And after his surgery, Carmine was prescribed painkillers. He says that's when it all started.

C Carmine Posteraro 04:48

After I got the injury, you know, I started selling pot in university and stuff. And I'm not focusing on my work. And even back then, in the early 2000s like it was. Uh, really easy to get painkillers. Like doctors were handing them out, like, like candy, almost, so that, like, that was my first taste into that.

V Vanessa Tiberio 05:09

According to research published by the Public Health Agency of Canada, prescription opioid use and misuse has been increasing since 1999.

C Carmine Posteraro 05:20

they started me with the Percocets and, you know, all that stuff that kind of gets you going, you they tell you not to abuse well, like, but honestly, back then, they were telling people they're fine and they're not really addictive. And that kind of got me started, you know, with a lot of that stuff. And then you get mixed up in that world and buying them and selling them, and then do this and that. So it just kind of kind of snowballs.

V Vanessa Tiberio 05:42

 Vanessa Tiberio 05:42

Carmine got mixed up in the wrong crowd. His grades dropped, and he had to withdraw from school. He started working as a casino security guard. That job came with lots of late nights. He was always around drugs. Before long, Carmine developed a cocaine addiction.

 Carmine Posteraro 06:01


You're up late, you're, you know, you're in the bar scene. People are doing drugs and drinking and having fun, so that kind of keeps you going down that same path that I got into. And every time you, like, relapse, it's not just a short thing, like, it's usually, like, a build up, and then you fall off and, like, everything falls apart, you know? And so, yeah.

 Vanessa Tiberio 06:25

Carmine began losing touch with those who were close to him, especially his family.

 Christina Fontana 06:30

I knew what was kind of going on, and like, he'd get mad at me for kind of, like, calling him out on it, and, you know, and saying, like, I know what you're doing.

 Vanessa Tiberio 06:40


Christina Fontana is Carmine's younger sister. Seeing her brother change was painful.

 Christina Fontana 06:47

I hated who he was. I hated seeing the person he was becoming because I knew that wasn't him. I knew he was a good person like and so seeing him like that was frustrating.

 Carmine Posteraro 07:00

Then I kind of had another 10 year run after that, off and on, heavy and, you know, not so much, but till, till 2019 came for me. And then that's when everything kind of really turned around/

 Vanessa Tiberio 07:12

Carmine then started using fentanyl .Between 2018 and 2019, he overdosed, not once, not twice, not three times or four, but five times.


 Carmine Posteraro 07:22

 Carmine Posteraro 07:28


And I was reckless and didn't care. And I would say, Yeah, sure, you know, and like that, that's kind of how it happened every time. And like, yeah, it's pretty, pretty brutal. You don't, you don't take into account, like, the consequences, and you're just like, living in the moment. I guess.

 Vanessa Tiberio 07:46

The next trip to the hospital was different.

 Carmine Posteraro 07:49


There was a nurse in the emergency room, and I had there was a fifth time I got brought in, and she had been there one other time, and she's like, Man, how many times you gonna do this and expect to live like, really? That's another thing that I still haven't forgotten, really. So, yeah, that that just that kind, you know, I was already there, like I knew I, you know, I had, I had to do something or I was gonna die.

 Vanessa Tiberio 08:15

So Carmine had been doing drugs for more than 15 years and isolated himself from his family.

 Christina Fontana 08:22

Finally, it was just like, okay, you know, he needs help. He needs encouragement. He you know he doesn't need people against him. So just kind of like changing my attitude and just trying to really encourage him to get there and get help, and knowing, hey, listen, no matter what, we're here for you. That was a big thing.

 Vanessa Tiberio 08:40

They loved Carmine so much, but they didn't know how to best support him to get help, so they turned to one of his close friends.

 David 08:48

Carm's mom called me and asked for my help because she had, she had, she knew that I struggled with addiction and had gone to various rehab programs.

 Vanessa Tiberio 08:59

This is David, a childhood friend. So he urged him to get some help.



David 09:04

Carm was ready at that point, and so I reached out to karm. I gave him all the information. And like, really, you need hand holding to get someone in, because, like, even the drive to the rehab place is, like the most vulnerable that you can be as an addict.



Carmine Posteraro 09:25

I'll never forget my I had about a month before I got in there, and I wasn't doing like crazy stuff, but I was still using. And I just remember him saying to me, just don't die before you get there, please. You know what I mean, just take it easy this month before you get there. So like, and those words ring in my head all the time, and I tell that to other people that are in going in...



Vanessa Tiberio 09:42

In rehab, Carmine discovered a new passion.



Carmine Posteraro 09:46

So we'd start our days there I was in the kitchen. So I'd be up at 5:30 and I would cook for 60 guys twice a day. You know, sometimes good, sometimes not so much, but they all ate it. And, you know, I realized I could do it. But.



Vanessa Tiberio 10:00

Half of Carmine stays at rehab were spent in Bible study. The rest of the time was set aside for doing work around the center.



Carmine Posteraro 10:07

Most guys, they move around, but I just like cooking. I like the kitchen, so I just stayed in the kitchen.



Vanessa Tiberio 10:13

Carmine enjoyed his time at the rehab program, despite the strict rules, no swearing, no smoking, no listening to secular music. He was getting along with people there and getting into the groove of having a daily routine. But that's when the world changed.



News montage 10:30

COVID-19 the risk of its spread now upgraded to the highest levels. Thousands more are

fighting for their lives in hospitals. Heightened states of emergency across the nation, as a number of Coronavirus cases soars above 3000.

**V** Vanessa Tiberio 10:44

Halfway through that rehabilitation program, COVID started making its rounds. It was March 2020, a time when information about the virus was scarce. Fear levels were high. Carmine decided to move home to live with his parents.

**C** Christina Fontana 10:59

Karm came home, and we were kind of like, why are you here? Like, you know? And he's like, Well, they sent everyone home the next day. It was a few days later. They're like, Carm. My mom was like, Carm's really sick.

**C** Carmine Posteraro 11:13

A day or two after I get home, I get a call from the center saying you might want to get tested with COVID, or because some of us here had COVID. So, like, my family started freaking out this and that.

**V** Vanessa Tiberio 11:23

So Carmine went to get tested, and he found out that he was positive.

**C** Carmine Posteraro 11:27

I wasn't that scared, like, you know, I was like, "Ah, it'll just be like, the flu." And then a couple days came on, I started getting worse, and then I was getting, like, black stuff coming out of my nose and stuff. And I was just, like, moping around on the couch, and I was wasn't moving around much, and my mom's like, but, like, because of COVID, you know, like, the overdoses and stuff, like, I didn't want to get back into an ambulance, like, you know, mess with my head. So I was, like, refusing. She's like, "No, no, I'm doing it Carm, and like, you have to go." So I get to the hospital, and this is before masks and everything. So I get into so they roll me in, and there's like seven people were there waiting, all gowned up, masked up, everything, right? I'm like, "Holy shit, what's going on here?"

**V** Vanessa Tiberio 12:13

It was at this moment that Carmine recognized his family friend Peter, who worked at the hospital.



**C** Carmine Posteraro 12:19

And I see one of the guys there. I recognize him. So his parents lived right behind my grandparents. And I said to him, I said, "Hey, Peter, how's your father?" And he's like, "Don't worry about my dad. We're worrying about you right now." Kind of thing, right? And so, and then, honestly, three, four minutes later, they gave me a shot, and that was it.

**V** Vanessa Tiberio 12:42

The doctors placed Carmine in a medically induced coma and put him on a ventilator. He had pneumonia and severe lung damage. Meanwhile, at home, Carmine's family started to develop symptoms, while his mom and sister were able to fight it. At home, his dad had to be taken to the hospital for pneumonia. Now, Carmine and his dad were both in hospital.

**C** Christina Fontana 13:05

I don't even know how we survived, like it was just it was awful. It was awful, like so many emotions and honestly, like, we just kept praying that everything was going to be okay.

**V** Vanessa Tiberio 13:16

The only update Carmine family got was a daily phone call from doctors. His mom would wait anxiously by the phone every day for almost two weeks.

**C** Christina Fontana 13:27

And it was like, yeah, one day it was like, "Oh, he's he's not doing great." And then we're like, Okay, this is it. And then the next day, he's like, "Well, he's doing a little better. Like, he's hanging on, we flipped him over onto his stomach, or we did this." Like, It's so awful because, like, you, you're you feel so helpless because you can't be there. So that was the hardest part of it, right? Like just feeling so helpless during that time, and no one really knew. Doctors didn't know, like, what to do. I feel like it was just all new for everybody. So that was hard for sure.

**V** Vanessa Tiberio 14:00

Almost two weeks went by, then finally, some good news. Carmine was awake.

**C** Carmine Posteraro 14:07

I was off my rocker that first day, like, I was like, I was tearing stuff out. I was like, I had to apologize to the nurse. The next day, I was like, I'm sorry. You know what I mean?

**C** Christina Fontana 14:19



My mom called and she's like, Carm just called. I'm like, what? She's like, "Yeah, he's out of the coma." So then we Facetimed him. It was so emotional, like crying. We were all crying like, you know, he had this huge beard, and he just looked like, so rough, and he had this big scar on his face. And I was like, what happened? And he was just like, I have no idea.

V

Vanessa Tiberio 14:43

The scar on Carmine's face was caused by the ventilator mask digging into his skin. When

C

Carmine Posteraro 14:49

I got out, you know, I was everything was hard. I was shaking. I couldn't hold a spoon. I was walking with a walker, you know, I didn't know if I was gonna recover. I didn't know if, like, I would get COVID again. And this would happen again, because they weren't, like, really giving me a straight answer in there. I mean, they didn't know, but that, you know, they didn't say that, "Oh, you'll never get COVID again. You already had it." So, like, you know, there was always that worry too, right?

V

Vanessa Tiberio 15:12

All of this after having overdosed five times on fentanyl and completing a rehab program for that.

C

Carmine Posteraro 15:21

It was frustrating, because I've been through so much already. I remember, you know, being pretty upset just with where I was in life. I felt like, you know, I couldn't catch a break kind of thing. But I was just grateful to be alive at that point because, you know, I'd learned about how close I was to death. So, your outlook changes after something like that.

V

Vanessa Tiberio 15:46

Carmine's survival story was unique. At the time, doctors were still trying to figure out what procedures work best for COVID patients, since it was so early in the pandemic. So a medical journal wrote about his experience. Local newspapers, radio stations and television networks started to pick up Carmine's story. It was shared online a lot, and people would reach out. While most of the comments were positive, he also received some backlash.

C

Carmine Posteraro 16:19

Hey, at least you don't look like the man child of Al Capone and Uncle Fester. Yes, I'm a Scarface. I have to walk amongst you marked by the butcher. People often ask me how I got my scar. Funny. You should ask.



Vanessa Tiberio 16:39

As Carmine continued to recover from COVID. He spent time in the kitchen, like he did in rehab, and launched a catering business. He also started thinking about comedy.



Carmine Posteraro 16:51

I was always a joker. You know that first day of the semester when you get to see who's in your class? Well, I was like, one of the guys that always showed up late. And you know, people would see me, they'd be like, all sweet cars in our class. We're going to be laughing this semester.



Vanessa Tiberio 17:07

He saw an advertisement for a local comedy workshop appear on his Facebook feed one day, so he decided to give it a shot.



Carmine Posteraro 17:14

Thank God I did click on it and I took this this class. And I'll tell you, the first time I went up, I killed it, and then, like, I couldn't believe I did that. Well, I didn't, wasn't expecting it.



Vanessa Tiberio 17:24

Comedy keeps Carmine busy, and it's a way for him to share his story.



Carmine Posteraro 17:29

Guys are coming up to me after saying, "Hey, I didn't think I was the only one drinking water tonight." You know, stuff, little stuff like that. Just kind of inspiration, I guess, to tell people that it is possible to recover, but also make light on a really, not, not a great situation. I like to bring happiness and joy into people's life, especially making them laugh. And, you know, like people, you know, there was a time people didn't really want to be around me, and now people are love to be around me, right?



Vanessa Tiberio 17:59

Carmine is well aware there are still challenges after rehab. According to the Canadian Center on Substance use and rehab, close to half of the people who leave a rehab facility relapse. David, the childhood friend who helped Carmine get into rehab, is still struggling. He says Carmine support means a lot.



**D** David 18:20

How far along he came in, like the whole COVID, like near-death experience, which are I also experienced due to my liver, I almost died, like I was actually given three months to live after I left the hospital, but I'm fine now. So the tables have turned. Whereas, like, I look up to him as a role model for surviving,

**C** Carmine Posteraro 18:49

For me, it's a recipe. I need to exercise, I need to go to Mass, I need to read my Bible. I need to be around family. I need to keep busy. Um, that's that's basically when what the work is like. And each day it'll get easier, the further away, the longer your sobriety day gets. It's easier and easier, but those for that first few months, years, crucial, crucial you gotta it's and it's hard. It's real hard. I used to be very reckless. I didn't really care, but I realize now that, like, I should be pushing daisies, I should be dead. So like, with what this time I have left, I'm going to make the best of it, because it's all kind of bonus time. So if I can share my message, help somebody else along the way. Like, I'd really like to be a positive now than the detriment.

**V** Vanessa Tiberio 19:41

Carmine says he owes a lot to his family, especially his mother.

**C** Carmine Posteraro 19:48

Can we give a round of applause for my mother? Please? This lady's been through everything with me ever since I was in short pants. Hey Ma? She's the the queen of visitation day, rehab, hospital, jail. She but she's a soldier, though, cops used to come around. "Mrs. Pasta, where's Carm?" "I don't know." "Mrs. Pasta, where's Carm?" "I haven't seen him in a month." "Mrs. Pasta, where's Carm?" "I no speak English."

**V** Vanessa Tiberio 20:29

As for the future, Carmine wants to continue working on his comedy sets and finessing his craft. He's also thinking about opening a restaurant, but most importantly, he wants to make his family proud.

**C** Carmine Posteraro 20:44

Yeah so I'm just very grateful. Like, you know, I have a great family, my sister, my mother, my father, you know, my poor mom, like, I put her through everything with that lady. She there should be a statue of her somewhere. It's been tough on my family, for sure, definitely over the years. You know, lot of phone calls and, you know, not showing up, not coming home. You know, there's times they didn't see me for months at a time. So it was just, it was tough for them, you know, and they've been through a lot, and I but I'm grateful that, you know, they stuck by me, because I couldn't have done it without them. Thanks, everybody.



Vanessa Tiberio 21:31

We got an update from Carmine just before publishing this episode. Sadly, his close friend David has passed away. The We Met U Team is sending our sympathies.



Yanika Saluja 21:51

We met U is a production by journalism students at Toronto Metropolitan University. This episode was narrated by Vanessa Tiberio. It was produced by Vanessa Tiberio and Zaina Elrazek. Shari Okeke is our executive producer and professor. Eunice Kim is our senior producer and teaching assistant. Angela Glover is our Director of audio production. Our season three theme music was composed and performed by Eric Croda. Web, designed by Lindsay Hanna. Special thanks to The Creative School, the School of Journalism, and the Journalism Research Center at Toronto Metropolitan University, for supporting Season Three by sending some of our producers to the Resonate 2024 podcast festival in Richmond, Virginia. I'm your host. Yanika Saluja, thanks for listening.