

Books: Rough lives laid bare in story of recovery

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By Steve Pike

"I was born addicted to heroin."

That Garcia Marquez-esque line opens *The Painting and the Piano*, co-authored by Ocean Ridge residents John Lipscomb and Adrienne Lugo. The self-published book follows Lipscomb and Lugo from seemingly well-adjusted childhoods through the rock bottom of addiction and finally to lives of discovery, redemption and recovery.

As the opening line of the first chapter implies, *The Painting and the Piano* is not meant to be an altogether pleasant read. It is, however, a "must read" for anyone whose life — directly or indirectly — has been touched by addiction, a broken family, abandonment and isolation.

In other words, *The Painting and the Piano* (available on Amazon.com for \$16.95, and e-book, Kindle, Nook and Apple I-Books for \$6.95) is well-written but not an easy read. Neither Lipscomb, a recovering alcoholic, nor Lugo, who was addicted to pills, pulls punches nor makes any excuses about laying bare their lives. One family friend of Lipscomb, in fact, discouraged him from writing the book as it would divulge secrets of Lipscomb's family life in the well-to-do community of Ladue, Mo., near St. Louis.

"All I knew was barbecue with beer," Lipscomb said. "I was a mess getting on a plane." Lugo's story drew headlines more than four decades ago when a judge removed her from her middle-class foster parents on Long Island in favor of a heroin-addicted mother and father who lived in a dirty Brooklyn apartment. The book includes pictures of headlines from the highly publicized custody trial between Lugo's foster parents and her biological mother, whom she described as a "monster."

"Even now it's hard for me to look at those pictures the day she came and got me," Lugo said. "I don't think she really wanted me."

Lipscomb and Lugo tell their stories as a tandem, but each of their stories blends into a fine piece of writing rarely seen in first-time authors.

"My story isn't very unique, but Adrienne's is," Lipscomb said. "Its combination of our stories and our coming together turns it into a love story."

But before the love, there were drugs and booze. It's not pretty, but it's compelling. "We're doing this to help other people," said Lipscomb, who now lectures on addiction and together with Lugo, sponsors people with addictions. "It's kind of a gritty book — an emotional roller coaster. We don't look great in it, either. But it's our lives."

And in the end, their love story.