

## Breaking the Stigma of Addiction: One Family's Story

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We had a beautiful boy who died from a heroin overdose.  
I don't want to see one more parent lose their child to this terrible disease.  
I'm sharing our family's story to break the stigma of opioid addiction.

### Our Story

I met my husband at the local ski area in MN with all its 300 ft of vertical, ice-covered slopes. I was 17 yrs old, and he was 22 when we started dating, and skiing was a passion we shared. The age difference was scandalous, and our parents were not happy.

Our love story worked out. I went on to the University of MN and received a degree in Chemical Engineering, and Tom went on to have his own business and manufacturer's rep for skis and clothing.

When I finished my degree, we got married, traveled and had fun, bought a house and decided to have kids. Tragically, we lost our first child, a daughter, Alexandra, to anencephaly, a severe congenital disability. Devastated but determined to build a family we had our son, Hunter, in 1992 followed by Jake and finally Cooper (we call him our "trailer").

We raised our boys in the small town in Hudson WI. We read to them, spent time with them, exposed them to all range of experiences; sports, music, international travel, they had access to tutors and specialists. We were living our dream. We expected a lot from them and loved them deeply. And, of course, we taught them about drugs and alcohol.

### Hunter

#### Early Years

Hunter was a charming, charismatic, wicked funny, truly bewitching kid. He was gorgeous or "aesthetically pleasing," as I used to say.

#### High School Graduation

In 2010 when Hunter graduated from high school and started college in the fall. We thought, "we did it." One down, two to go.

The next couple years were fraught with tension as we saw Hunter slowly changing from the kid we knew. He just wasn't himself. He dropped out of college. He was often either contentious or sullen. We knew he drank with his buddies on the weekends, but we thought he just needed to find his passion.

#### Finding Out

In 2012, two years out of high school, we decided to talk with Hunter after he got home from work. Hunter got home quite late, and I had gone to bed, so Tom talked to him. In the morning Tom let me know that Hunter had asked for help as he was using drugs. He had tried to get himself off the drugs several times but couldn't. He wanted to get into treatment.

I went up to speak with Hunter that morning having put in my head that I would take the day off of work and get this taken care of, in my standard project management mode.

"Hunter, honey, dad talked with me. I understand that you need help to stop using drugs. It's Ok. We love you. We're so proud of you for asking for help. Let me know, what kind of drugs are you using?"

"Heroin, Mom".

My response was not my finest parenting moment. It was one of those times where the valve between your brain and your mouth breaks open and I immediately exclaimed, "Heroin, Hunter? That's like lying in the street in NYC kind of drug! How in the world can you be on heroin?"

"It's not like that anymore, Mom".

And that was the beginning of my course on addiction. Hunter entered treatment on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

### Illustration of personal bias

During those initial years, the learning curve was steep. While we always supported our son, I can say that I am not proud of how I reacted to Hunter at all times.

One of the characteristics of a person with the disease of addiction is that they are very self-centered and will do whatever it takes to get a hold of that drug. Their brain is effectively highjacked. Their disease changes their behavior, their personality, their looks, and, naturally, their interactions with their family.

I distinctly remember one time when he was verbally pushing me, likely as a way to get money, when I responded, "Don't blame me for your problems. This was your choice, and now you have to live with the consequences".

Thinking back, I'm truly embarrassed. Really, his choice? In 2010, when Hunter likely first tried a pain pill as a recreational drug, I can say that I didn't even know they were a party drug. At the time, methamphetamines and cocaine were the drugs in the public domain, and we'd warned of their use. The school's drug education didn't even mention opioids, pain pills or heroin.

So, if I didn't know about the incredible risk of addiction with opioids, pain pills, how would Hunter?

I now know that:

- Pain pills are often handed out at high school and college parties
- Their friends were often their dealers
- A common source is the family medicine cabinets containing the saved excess prescribed pain pills
- That these pain pills can be taken in tablet, powder or liquid form and swallowed, snorted, or injected
- That the progression is from pain pills to heroin

### Cycle of treatment and relapse

Hunter spent the next four years in a cycle of rehab, relapse, rehab, relapse.

In 2014 we found a treatment center in Arizona that had a philosophy that the kids needed to stay a minimum of six months. Hunter went to treatment there a couple different times each from six months to a year long. I respect the place and believe that Hunter's mind and body were able to heal but addiction is a chronic disease that can not truly be cured.

### Realizing positive impact of recovery

Finally, by 2016, it seemed all the counseling, therapy, education was taking hold. Hunter was 24 years old. He had independently gotten admitted and acquired financial aid to go to school at Wyotech, a well respected automotive repair school in Laramie WY.

Hunter was on fire! He was so focused on school. He attended class every day. He sat in front. He had top grades (he so wanted to work with Nascar), built great friendships, went to tutoring each night, sought out his teachers and called Tom and me three to four times a week. It was a joy to hear from him. He was going to Alcoholics Anonymous(AA) meetings, was seeing his AA sponsor regularly and was sponsoring two younger men in town. The Arizona treatment center asked if he would come down over the Christmas holiday to give a talk on his recovery.

### Story of gratitude for last time together

Thanksgiving was coming up, and we begged Hunter to come home for the holiday. He was reticent. He was concerned about missing a day of school.

He finally relented and flew home that Wednesday before Thanksgiving. It was awesome to see him. He spent the weekend deer hunting with Tom, playing with his seven and ten year old nephews, talking with our usual family crew of grandparents, siblings, cousins and aunts and uncles at the Thanksgiving table. Hunter asked for my homemade spaetzle and German salad.

We finally got to experience Hunter as a mature adult. He was happy, proud and gracious. I remember hugging him about twenty times that weekend, saying "I love you. I'm so proud of you".

We believe that Hunter relapsed the night before he flew home that Sunday. Tom talked with him on the phone Monday morning as Hunter walked to school. We weren't able to get in touch with him after that, and the police informed us that he died on Sunday, December 04, 2016, a week after we had put him on the plane back to school.

### Grief

I'm so grateful that we were able to see Hunter as a mature adult that Thanksgivings. It gives me solace. My experience is that nothing can prepare you for the death of a child. Grief, and especially grief for a child, is a whole different beast. I've taken a leave from work to mourn and honor our son, Hunter. My energy now goes to my family and to change the trajectory of this epidemic.

### The Ask

I want to close by asking you for a favor, to take on the additional, small but vital task of advocating for people with the disease of addiction by

- Courageously correct others when you hear them use the term addict or junkie to describe a person with the disease of addiction.
- Show empathy in the face of difficult interactions with people in the depths of that disease - knowing that the drug has high jacked their mind.
- Advocate and educate - every chance you get with colleagues, legislators, leaders, family and friends.

### Closing

Breaking the stigma of opioid addiction will garner greater resources, ingenuity and ultimately progress against this killer of a disease, a disease that can afflict any one of us or our children.

You are powerful people. I value your work and appreciate all you're doing to end this epidemic.

On behalf of my husband, Tom and myself, thank you

Ingrid



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