Don't Give Up Hope

Seven years ago our 38-year-old son was on a downward spiral of drinking that finally led to drugs: Meth to be specific. For more than one year we were in the dark about it until he was out of control—lost his job and had a son. We could not believe how naive and blind we were. Then it all started to make sense. The lack of money, the weird phone calls, the not showing up for family events, his actions, and his physical appearance.

For two years we tried desperately to get him help; one treatment program after another and always telling our son we love him. We ourselves started to attend recovery meetings, where we met other people going through the same thing.

Finally **we realized that it was beyond our control.** We were prepared for the worst and we told our son that we needed to take care of ourselves. We detached with love. He could always come to our house to shower and get a meal but he could not live with us, nor would we give him any money. Our son was arrested and we did not bail him out. He was so angry with us, but we told him we loved him. He was sentenced to go to a treatment program. He literally had only the clothes on his back, not even a pair of shoes, and it was winter. We told him to call when he was settled in and that we loved him.

He knew he was losing his family and possibly his son. That was three years ago. Today our son has gone through treatment, is working a program of recovery, and has custody of his son. We all take it a day at a time.

-- Larry & Peggy

(From Hope, Help & Healing: Personal Stories of Family Recovery)

He Thought He Could Handle It

Jason was the kind of person people were drawn to. He made friends easily and had a great sense of humor. He was a caring person and a loving son who respected his family. He was helpful around the house and in the winter he always shoveled our neighbor's walk. He loved kids, he was active in his youth group and he often volunteered for various community projects--he even worked for the agency I work for, a community-based group in Middlesex County, New Jersey that works to prevent substance abuse.

When Jason was a little boy, he'd lie about little things. When he was seven years old and swore he had taken a shower, even though the tub was completely dry. He got caught in lies like that all the time, but as he grew into a young man we talked about it and he said he realized how silly it all was. I was convinced he had outgrown it. In December of 2003, I realized he had not.

Jason was finishing the first semester of his second year as a pre–pharmacy major at Rutgers University. Since his dorm was only 45 minutes away, he came home frequently on weekends. On Sunday, December 14, I remember saying goodbye to him at our front door. I caressed Jason's cheek and told him I loved him.

The morning of December 17, 2003, my husband called me at work to tell me that the hospital had called to say Jason was brought to the emergency room. We met nearby and drove to the hospital together in silence. We couldn't imagine what had happened.

I have relived that day in my mind so many times, and while I really can't tell you exactly what the doctor said when we arrived at the hospital emergency room, the message was clear--my beautiful son was gone. Apparently, Jason had been abusing prescription drugs and had overdosed.

I thought to myself that this couldn't be possible. I work in prevention and Jason knew the dangers. We believed that he was not using drugs--we talked about it often. I was so convinced that he was not using, it became a sort of joke between us--as he would leave home at the end of a weekend, I would frequently say, "Jason, don't do drugs." "I know, Mom," he would say, "I won't." But he did.

In speaking with dozens of Jason's friends after his death, we learned his abuse of prescription drugs may have started after he began college, and apparently escalated the summer before he died.

We learned that he used the Internet to research the safety of certain drugs and how they react with others. As a pre-pharmacy major, maybe **he felt he knew more about these substances than he actually did.** We also learned that he had visited several online pharmacies and ordered drugs from one Mexican pharmacy online. We found records that this pharmacy automatically renewed his order each month.

I think back to the last several months of my son's life, trying to identify any signs I might have missed. I remember that sometime during his first year at Rutgers, I discovered an unlabeled pill bottle in Jason's room. I took the pills to my computer and identified them as a generic form of Ritalin. When I confronted Jason, he told me he got them from a friend who'd been prescribed the medication. He wanted to see if they would help him with his problem focusing in school. I took that opportunity to educate him on the dangers of abusing prescription drugs and told him that if he really thought he had A.D.D (Attention Deficit Disorder), we should pursue this with a clinician. He promised he would stop using the drug; he even called the counseling office to make an appointment for an evaluation.

The only other sign I can remember is that one weekend when Jason was home I passed him in the kitchen and noticed that his eyes looked odd--his pupils were as small as pinpoints. I confronted him right there and then, asked him if he was "on something." He said, "No, what's wrong?" and went over to a mirror to see what I was talking about. He said that he didn't know what was wrong--maybe it was because he was tired. I was suspicious, but his behavior was perfectly normal, so I let it go.

My son Jason made a difference in the world for 19 years, and he will keep making a difference now. By continuing to share his story, I hope to help other families avoid the kind of tragedy my family has suffered.

-- Linda

(Linda Surks began working in the substance abuse prevention field when Jason was six

years old. With the full support or her employer, the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD) of Middlesex County, Inc., *she works to prevent other families from suffering the pain of a devastating loss.)*

Getting the Message

The first time my daughter came home drunk, I'm embarrassed to say, I thought it was kind of cute. She was only 15, but she was swearing like a sailor. So I sloughed it off. But, unfortunately, it didn't stop there and her behavior began to get more and more problematic.

For a kid who used to love school and had a lot of friends, things started to change, and by the time she was 17 my wife and I were truly concerned.

When we talked to people about it, they often expressed the idea that it was just a phase that would pass, but before long we realized it wasn't getting any better.

We tried all the usual things – grounding her, telling her she couldn't hang out with certain kids who seemed to be a bad influence, withholding her allowance, thinking this would limit her ability to get hold of alcohol. But nothing seemed to work.

The situation escalated and one night we got a call from the local police station. She had been involved in an altercation outside a popular fast-food hangout and had been taken into custody for public intoxication. Of course, she made a series of promises afterwards that she would stop drinking, but they never stuck and the merry-go-round continued.

Eventually, we got in touch with her school counselor, who put us in touch with NCADD. It was extremely hard for us to accept that our daughter had a problem with alcohol and to talk about it with somebody else. But the people at the local affiliate suggested a treatment facility specializing in adolescent substance abuse, and through this treatment center **we began getting the message that alcoholism is a family disease and that we could – and should – actually get help for ourselves.**

Our daughter went through the treatment program and has been back in school for a while now. It can be difficult for her at times, what with peer pressure and the way many teenagers act about alcohol and drugs. However, with the work that we're doing as a family, she has been able to keep her recovery moving forward – and so have we.

We've been able to work through a lot of the hurts we all endured and have come to realize that our daughter has a disease. You can forgive somebody for having cancer; why not forgive them for having the disease of alcoholism?

Our family has our daughter back for the first time in a very long time. It is an indescribable feeling!

-- Peter R.