

By
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OPIOIDS STOLE MY SON

On June 9, 2017, Austin Chowdhury passed away from an accidental Fentanyl overdose at the age of 24.

Austin was a beautiful person inside and out. He was openhearted and would do anything for his family and friends. He loved to travel, play basketball, and read. He would read two new books a month and told everyone to do the same. He couldn't know or experience enough of life.

The worst day of my life was on June 9, 2017 when we found our son unconscious on his bedroom floor. My husband and I attempted to revive him with CPR and mouth-to-mouth

resuscitation, but he did not respond. We were in shock.

How could this be? He was talking, laughing, and watching a basketball game just the night before.

I felt a piece of me died with him, and I knew my life would never be the same.

And then came the questions I continue to ask without pause: *What could I have done to stop this? What can I do to help others so they do not go through what my family has experienced?*

We believe Austin's struggle with addiction began at age 14 with a dental procedure. As was normal then, they gave him hydrocodone to ease the pain. A few months later I found leftover pills in his desk. I asked him if he was taking them, and he said he was. It seemed like idle, foolish experimentation. We threw the pills away and told him that abusing prescription medication was both dangerous and stupid. According to his school friends, not long after, he became involved with a group abusing prescription painkillers.

The school expelled Austin and several of his friends when he was in 11th grade. There was no counseling, no opportunity to explain, no second chance.

Immediately afterwards we took him to a psychiatrist for six weeks of counseling. These sessions failed to have any impact, and the day after his final session, school security caught Austin buying pills. We were shocked into action and immediately took him to a rehabilitation center for an evaluation. Even with his repeated and reckless forays into pills, the evaluator said his use was merely recreational and not an immediate danger.

For the next year and a half, he did well in school and was accepted to The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Austin was academically and socially gifted, with a talent for delivering the message the listener wanted to hear – which may have been part of the problem. He did well in his freshman and sophomore years, but in his junior year, Austin moved into a house with a group of friends where they had frequent parties. This is not unusual for college students, and for those who are not predisposed to addiction, the impact may be negligible – like a few spills on the floor or a half-completed class assignment. But, for Austin, who craved artificial and chemical stimulation, the environment was toxic. According to his friends, he started taking pills and gradually began using heroin because it was less expensive than pills. And we had no idea.

After completing his undergraduate degree, Austin decided to stay and pursue a master's degree. By his second year in graduate school things were going downhill. We noticed he was spending a lot of money, but he always had a reason. He was earning his own money working at Starbucks, the student bookstore, a research position, and driving for Uber, but he always needed more. We attributed this to poor budgeting, eating at restaurants, and from going out with his friends. Now we see he had all the classic signs of addiction. Many days, he was moody, quiet, and withdrawn – like he was somewhere else – and then he would be pleasant and chatty. In my gut, I knew this was not normal. I would cry every time he was home because I knew something was very wrong.

Things became worse when he started taking money from us. When we confronted him, he would say he owed money to his friends and he probably smoked more weed than his friends.

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He claimed he only took pills every now and then. He was never honest.

Many times, we asked Austin to stop and he always said he would and it wasn't a big deal. He was doing well in school, so we thought if he had a serious problem, it would have impacted his schoolwork. As parents we did not want to believe the worst could be happening and based on what we knew – or what we thought we knew – about addiction, we assumed if he was in serious danger, it would be obvious in his daily life. As far as we could tell he was functioning well. We had no idea he was using heroin – if we had known we would have taken him out of school and gotten him the help he needed.



But the situation continued to escalate, and we wanted to take him out of school. Austin thought that would be stupid since he was almost finished, and he promised to stop. We also thought, he'll be home soon and we'll be able to keep an eye on him.

On May 12, 2017 Austin received his Master's Degree in Urban Planning from UNC Chapel Hill. He was so proud of his accomplishment. I think because he managed to get his master's while struggling with an addiction to heroin. Austin was a high functioning heroin user.

Today, I feel I let my son down because all the signs were there. Sometimes, I think parents are subconsciously in denial because we just can't believe our children are doing this. I was also uneducated about heroin addiction. I go through all the signs every day and all the 'what ifs.'

We confirmed Austin was using heroin on June 7, 2017. He was arrested for possession of heroin when he passed out at an intersection – and possibly going into

withdrawal – behind the wheel of his car. Someone called the police who found the heroin he had probably just taken. The next day we went to court, and he was with us all day.

One day later, we found Austin on his bedroom floor.

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What he likely believed was heroin, was in fact a lethal mix of Fentanyl and Cyclopropyl Fentanyl. Fentanyl is 100-times more potent than morphine and many times that of heroin. Later, we learned the person who sold him the drug that led him to pass out in the car was the same person who brought him the drug he took the night he died. Nationwide, some 125 people die every day from overdoses caused by opioids mixed with Fentanyl. Since 1999, over 500,000 people have died from overdoses.

I want you to know two things.

First, addiction is a biological, chronic brain disease. It is almost impossible to overcome an addiction without support and treatment.





People do not become addicted to drugs or alcohol because of a failing of character or from a lack of willpower. Many are predisposed to addiction while others develop opioid use disorder by taking their medications as directed. Once they are in addiction to whatever drug it may be, they are tied to it chemically.

Second, those living in addiction have disordered lives leading them to become disconnected from their healthy routines. As the addiction deepens, they stop caring for themselves, become estranged from friends and family, and stop taking pleasure in the ordinary pursuits that used to order their lives.

After Austin passed away, I found a notebook where he kept notes. He was seeing a counselor at Chapel Hill who I guess told him to write down things for a successful day. These notes broke my heart: eat three healthy meals, get enough sleep, shower every day, keep in touch with friends. I just cried when I read this. I had no idea he was going through all this at school, because according to his roommate, he would clean up when we came to see him.

Despite what was going on, Austin would call us every Sunday without fail. Throughout his addiction, he was the son we loved for his compassion and empathy for others.

Every day is torture for my husband and me. We miss Austin so much and wonder what his life would have been had he not gone down this road.

I hope by telling Austin's story I can stop one person from trying the pill that may kill them or that can lead to opioid addiction. Why take the chance? It is like playing Russian roulette, and it will not end well for him, her, their family, or their community.

Every day is torture for my husband and me. We miss Austin so much and wonder what his life would have been had he not gone down this road.

If this story helps just one person, then we will hopefully find peace. I know Austin would want us to do this. We do not want another family to go through this unbearable pain.

If you know someone struggling in addiction, love them. Don't fight them, don't judge them, and don't throw them on the street. Avoid the stigma that can lead you to treat your loved ones harshly. Find out how to help them because they will lie, steal, and cheat to get their drugs.

And for the love of everything holy, pray for them.

Above all, remember recovery is possible with love, support, and treatment.

Let's talk opioids with our family and friends to save lives.