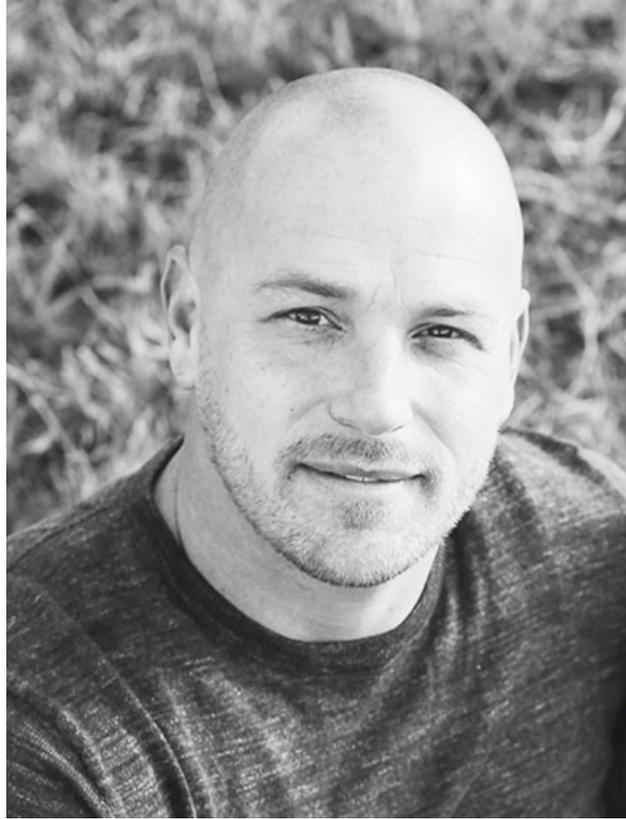


By
Donna Avagliano



A MOTHER'S FIGHT

If a mother's love could cure addiction, my son Daniel would be alive today. He'd be at home with his wife and children who he loved so dearly ... and he would still be visiting me every week.

He was just 38 when he died.

I miss his smiling face and the kind and caring person he was to the very end.

Daniel died on October 4, 2021, the day he came home from a 30-day rehab. Regardless of what the autopsy says, his death was due to his long-term addiction to opioids and heroin.

His path to addiction started five years before with Oxycodone and Vicodin prescribed by a physician for a back injury caused when he fell down an elevator shaft at work. At that time, such prescriptions were not closely monitored, so he received them for almost two years. He didn't acknowledge he was addicted, but after the medications were cut off by his doctors – due to new laws in North Carolina – he hit the streets, leaving his family and me in financial ruin. Due to the high cost of these pills he turned to heroin, and addiction took over my son.

Daniel lost weight. When he tried to detox, he became very sick with headaches, nausea, vomiting, and cold sweats. Valuables began disappearing, such as pressure washers, cell phones, jewelry, coins, money, and anything he could sell or pawn. He would nod off, eyes half-closed, and forget he was talking to us. He wore long-sleeved shirts and jeans even in hot weather. He lost many old friends and made many new contacts, but none he called a friend...those were his dealers. He shut himself off from friends and family out of shame and guilt.

Over a three year period, Daniel was in residential treatment four times. During his first stay, he told me how he turned from opioid pills to heroin. The cost of pills was at least eight times higher than the cost of heroin.

He shut himself off from friends and family out of shame and guilt.

His drug misuse took over my life as well. I could only focus on him and trying to save him. I was on a roller-coaster with no way to get off. I no longer had a life outside of Daniel's drug use. I stopped going places and talking to friends; I closed my life off. Our entire family, including his older brother, was consumed by his use of drugs, consumed with worry and fear. Hiding the secret.

STIGMA IN MY LIFE

Having a child who battles addiction, you know firsthand the painful price of your love as you helplessly watch your loved one struggle. You struggle to show love while putting up boundaries, and dealing with the intense fear of being shunned by those outside of your immediate family if they found out about the situation. The shame is enormous.

Every family is unique. Ours shared a bond, a belief, and a determination to support him and one another during these times. We would never give up the fight and always reminded him he was loved and worthy of recovery.

There is no "one-size-fits-all" solution for helping a family member who is addicted to opioids or dealing with the mental illness and depression it causes. Yet, society often sees this as a choice, or even the result of bad parenting. Many, even in some churches, push back and don't like to discuss what is happening and why...putting their heads in the sand. It's as if the person who uses drugs, and their loved ones, have to wear a scarlet letter.

When your child has a substance use disorder, it affects more than him. The entire family hides the truth and needs recovery because of what stigma can do:

- Jobs at risk
- Loss of friends
- Feeling alone
- Fear and anxiety of their dying
- Lack of sleep
- Health issues
- Depression
- Loss of financial security

There are unique challenges that come with supporting and helping your loved one. Frequently, my health declined as it was no longer my priority. I was so focused on Daniel, I overlooked my other son, my husband, and other close family. The only focus I had was to make my child well...but secretly.

Even now, I was afraid to share Daniel's story publicly until I talked with family, as I didn't want to impact their businesses, their jobs, Daniel's children, his niece, and nephew. We hid this for so long. Even doctors treat people with opioid use disorder as if they are different, and their staff talks about them when they leave. It's sad!

DEALING WITH STIGMA

I was so afraid, until I became actively involved with the Gaston Controlled Substances Coalition and support groups for addicted loved ones. Then I made it a mission to learn as much as I could about addiction. How can I make a difference? Not just for my son, but for all of those suffering.

Becoming involved and staying involved.
Stomping out the stigma, educating society.
Taking baby steps until they become big steps and now promising to make my Daniel's loss of life a beacon for others. I want to make a difference in the way the world sees opioids and substance misuse.

Learning how to live without my son is hard. But maybe being open about my experience and his experience – he wanted to be free from drugs – can save the life of another mother's child.

WHAT I NEED YOU TO KNOW

Regardless of why a person becomes addicted to opioids, they deserve a chance and should have the support of the entire community, free of shame and guilt. A hand extended to lift them up instead of kicking them while they are down. Recovery has to become achievable and affordable.

We need long-term residential treatment centers that don't cost thousands of dollars. A person can NOT recover in a 30-day program. It's hard for them to stay focused and willing when society and our programs don't offer them more options, or worse, puts them down. I know families that have financed homes to pay for their child's recovery. Since most people with a substance use disorder have no money or anything of value, their families have to pay for their recovery. We

are losing thousands and thousands of people to opioids. It's senseless. No one wants to become an addict.

We need to reduce the amount of paperwork required to find residential treatment programs if our loved ones have no family support or funds. They can NOT take on these responsibilities because of the impact drugs have on their brains. So, they walk away and enter the world of drugs again because they feel there is no way out.

Our loved ones need half-way houses and job assistance. Sending a person back on the streets or back home after 30 or even 180 days of treatment doesn't work. The pressure on them is enormous. They need a strong support group to have their back. And more companies need to step up and give them a chance to work so they know they are worthy again.

Most importantly, I want our community to remember and know: This is a person, a mother's child, regardless of their age, and it is devastating to lose a child.

Learning how to live without my son is hard. But maybe being open about my experience and his experience – he wanted to be free from drugs – can save the life of another mother's child.

The entire family should not be shamed or feel they have to hide when this is happening in their life...my son was loved! He wanted to be in recovery, he wanted to be Daniel again. He wanted to make his family proud, have his good job back, be a financial leader in his home again.

Daniel wanted it so much.

He fought hard, but lost the battle.