



NO GOODBYES

A mother struggles to find a new normal after her 19-year-old “miracle child” overdoses on heroin. **BY LEAH DOBKIN**

The front doorbell rang. Through sheer white curtains, I could see two female police officers standing on the porch of my bungalow. Were they fundraising, I wondered? Were my neighbors OK? I welcomed them into my home.

“Would you like something to drink?” I asked the officers.

“No, thank you,” one officer replied. “Could you sit down please?”

My heart started pounding, as if it wanted to drown out whatever I was about to hear.

“I’m sorry to have to tell you this...” started one of the officers, “but your daughter has died.”

It was March 6, 2012, a day after my birthday. Hannah Rose was only 19. She had overdosed on a mix of heroin, cocaine and painkillers, drugs I hadn’t even known she used.

I can’t remember much of the rest of that day. In fact, I can’t remember much of the rest of the year. I became a zombie, stumbling around outside, but dead inside. My family was afraid to drive with me. I was on autopilot, sometimes ignoring stop signs, sometimes idling at green traffic lights until a car horn jolted me out of my fog. In the grocery store, I would grab a package of Boca Burgers – Hannah’s favorite – forgetting that she would not be home to eat them.

I will never get over my daughter’s death. But after more than two years, I am ready to come back to the living. And I have a message for every parent who thinks this could never happen to them: Think again.

My daughter was a miracle baby. My husband and I had difficulty starting our family, but after four years, with the assistance of an infertility elixir, Hannah Rose was born. The entire world seemed brighter when she entered our lives, and she was a bright child, too. Always petite, with huge, curious brown eyes, she skipped two grades and graduated from high school at 16.

But maybe Hannah was too smart for her own good. In high school, when she told me she had experimented with marijuana, she shared a dozen scientific studies showing that marijuana wasn’t so dangerous.

The trouble is, when it came to heroin, she didn’t have all the information. No one does. The United States is in the midst of a major heroin epidemic, and the heroin now on the street is more potent than any heroin ever produced. Often, dealers secretly mix it with cheaper and deadlier substances, anything from infant laxatives to the narcotic fentanyl, which is more than twice as powerful as heroin.

Think this is an urban problem? Not so. It reaches into almost every suburban and rural community in America. The number of users in the U.S. nearly doubled between 2005 and 2012, from 380,000 to 670,000, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse. Accidental drug overdose is currently the leading cause of injury-related death for people between the ages of 35 and 54, and the second-leading cause of injury-related death for young people, according to the Drug Policy Alliance. Drug overdose deaths now exceed those attributed to car crashes, firearms, homicides or HIV/AIDS.

Fueling the epidemic is heroin’s low cost and widespread accessibility. It’s as available as a home-delivered pizza. Call a number and it will be delivered to your front door. It’s also cheaper than pizza and most other recreational drugs. Because of an increase in opium poppy production in Afghanistan, and newer producers and exporters, such as Mexico, a bag of 0.05 to .1 grams of

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perspective

powdered heroin sells for about \$4 to \$10.

Why did a smart girl like Hannah get involved in drugs? I struggle with the question every day. I read all her diaries and poetry and interviewed her friends. I discovered there is a youth drug culture unlike the culture I was exposed to in the 1960s and 1970s. In my youth, we were idealistic, optimistic and ready to tackle society's problems. Right or wrong, drugs back then were seen as a way of becoming more mindful, more aware and more involved.

Today's young adults are more sophisticated – and cynical. They witnessed 9/11 at a very impressionable age. When children most need security, our children were jolted into chaos and the uncomfortable truth that the world is fragile and tenuous, and that death can be right around the corner. I wonder if this uncertainty created a cohort effect, a mindset causing this generation, in particular, to live more “in the now,” because who knows about tomorrow.

This generation, the millennials, entered adulthood during the worst economy since the Great Depression. It is difficult to afford college, difficult to make a living, but not difficult to party. Because drugs are incredibly accessible and affordable, they are commonly used as a stress buster. Hannah and her friends were surrounded by a smorgasbord of prescription, synthetic and other illegal drugs, such as psilocybin mushrooms, unlike anything I could ever imagine – a perfect storm of deadly variables that makes hard drugs more attractive and less scary.

I don't know if Hannah knew exactly what she was buying the night she died, but I do know who sold her the heroin, thanks to her cell phone text messages. I know his name, but let's call him “Joe.” Joe is six years older than Hannah. His parents live in my community, and his grandparents live in a suburb close by. Hannah never introduced me to Joe or his family, but we have acquaintances in common.

After Hannah died, I “friended” Joe on Facebook. He sent me his condolences, not realizing that I knew he'd sold my daughter her last, lethal dose.

The Milwaukee police were reluctant to go after this man, whom I saw as my

daughter's killer. They told me he was a “small fish” in the drug trade, not worth their time. After many months, I was able to convince them to open an investigation. I wanted them to arrest Joe for homicide, as Wisconsin's laws allow under the Len Bias law, which stipulates if a drug dealer sells an illegal substance to a person, and that person takes the drug and then dies as a result of the drug, the dealer can be charged with murder.

I wanted Joe behind bars where he couldn't hurt anyone else. And I wanted him – someone – to pay for what happened to my child. I couldn't believe that she could be gone, just like that, while everything else in the world stayed the same.

Hannah's death was senseless. Yet even the lives of those who die too young have an enduring impact on those they briefly touched.

On the first anniversary of Hannah Rose's death, Joe still hadn't been caught. I signed on to Facebook to look at the messages of love that Hannah's friends poured onto her page. They still write to her about their dreams, post photographs of their new tattooed roses – in honor of Hannah Rose – and post music and videos they think she would enjoy. Her Facebook page is so active that it's as if she never died.

With curiosity and a measure of dread, I clicked through to Joe's Facebook page, to see what he was up to. To my shock, I discovered that he had just died of a heroin overdose – another statistic, another devastated family, another human being swept away. Although I never met him, I learned from his Facebook page he was a talented musician who struggled with addiction. My hatred for him dissipated, as I realized he was just another stressed-out kid who made bad choices.

I had been on an emotional roller coaster, feeling that everyone was to blame and no one was to blame. But I now realize the blame game isn't going to bring her back, especially self-blame. I saw that my anger,

self-pity and guilt can be exhausting and nearly as self-destructive as drugs. I can now recognize this unhealthy chatter in my head, and redirect my thoughts and actions to a more productive place.

As I began to resume a more "functional" life again, I learned the U.S. Food and Drug Administration recently approved a naloxone hand-held auto-injector called Evzio. It's an inexpensive, generic drug that restores breath to unconscious overdose victims, buying time until emergency responders can arrive. The National Institute on Drug Abuse and the FDA are working with drug manufacturers to support the development of nasal spray formulations of this life-saving medication.

I also learned that 21 states, including Wisconsin, and the District of Columbia, have enacted some form of the 911 Good Samaritan law, which offers a degree of immunity to those who seek medical help for an overdose victim. Your child and his or her network of friends need to know that they can call to get help for a friend who's overdosing without risking prosecution for their own drug use.

Hannah's death was senseless. Yet even the lives of those who die too young have an enduring impact on those they briefly touched. Hannah Rose always had an affinity with animals. As a child, butterflies flocked to her at the Milwaukee Public Museum's exhibit, sometimes a dozen at a time, landing on her as she giggled and strangers stared with amazement. She taught her goldfish to do summersaults with her magic finger. When she was little, she wanted to be a dolphin trainer and, when she was older, an oceanographer. Most recently, she volunteered at Discovery World's aquarium, caring for the fish and teaching children about the living creatures in our magnificent Lake Michigan.

The staff from Discovery World remembered Hannah fondly. They allowed us to hold her memorial service in their auditorium. Every seat was filled, people from every walk of life – police officers, students, homeless men and women she had befriended. That day, I was reminded that no one's life is wasted if they have loved and were loved. My daughter, Hannah Rose, loved and was loved. ■

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