

Katy Snapp

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Dr. O'Donnell

The Heavy Price of Opiate Addiction: My Family's Story

On December 16, 2009 at 8:00am, my twenty-two year old brother Daniel took his last breath. I held his hand while I watched his pupils dilate and the life fade out of him. Stillness swept over the hospital room. The doctor, a short Indian man with glasses and a thick accent, listened with his stethoscope, looked up at us and shook his head. "He's gone. I'm very sorry." Several family members stood gathered around his bed, and they were weeping and sniffing, but at that moment, I heard nothing; peace. I was angry. I wanted him to come back. How could God take someone so young? Daniel wasn't coming back; I knew that. As we said our goodbyes and left the hospital to make funeral arrangements, I thought back to the last few years and wondered how my parents and I allowed things to get to the point of no return.

My brother was always the weakest out of the two of us. I was two years older than him, so I assumed the role of his protector. He took things harder than I did. Even when we were little and got sick, Daniel always had the hardest time getting well. He was more sensitive than I was. As we got older, even as far back as middle school, I remember that he started trying different drugs. First it was marijuana, then Xanax, then Hydrocodone, then Percocet. Before I knew it, he

was crushing the Percocet and snorting them. By the time 2005 rolled around, my parents and I were dealing with a full-blown hardcore drug addiction. I didn't know what to do to help him, and neither did my parents. We went through many sleepless nights, bailing my brother out of jail and trying to talk him into going to rehab. He wanted none of that. My brother stole from everyone in the family in order to support his drug habit. Daniel made it clear that he needed his drugs, and he wasn't interested in getting clean. Soon, the Percocet wasn't enough and he started shooting up Morphine. My dad, who was in very bad health, had been prescribed Morphine. Dad had too many health problems to count: COPD, heart disease, and a deteriorating back. He received a large amount of opiates by mail every month, and Daniel knew it. Soon, Daniel was stealing pills from my dad more often than not. This began a long battle of theft, accusations, and fighting amongst my family.

I tried to talk to Daniel in private about his drug addiction. Many evenings I sat in my parents' basement and watched helplessly as he tried to find a perfect vein to shoot up in. He stayed in the basement; his opiate addiction had made it impossible for him to sleep normal hours. In the basement, he could shoot up in private and sleep when he wanted to. His pants were always smeared with blood and pill coating. He always said the same thing: "I'll be alright". I knew that things were NOT alright. "Do you ever wish you didn't have to do that?" I asked. His only response was "I love my drugs". I knew it was no longer a matter of recreational drug use. Daniel needed those pills in order to get through the day. I knew that if he didn't have the pills, he was sick, sweating and shaking. I had seen him in that condition, and it was heartbreaking, but I didn't know what to do to help him. Daniel and I had always been close, but I subconsciously

began to distance myself from him because of his drug addiction. Perhaps I did that because I didn't really know what to say to him anymore. Drugs had become the only factor in his life.

I wanted our family back to normal, but then that made me wonder if our family had ever been normal. I had a good idea of what made Daniel turn to drugs. We had not had the best childhood. It was a childhood marked by memories of my parents fighting over money and my dad's drinking, and my mom's abusive tendencies due to her depression. Maybe all of that was too much for Daniel to live with. Maybe he needed the drugs in order to forget some of the things we had been through. I also knew the fact that we lived in Hawkins County, TN, where opiate and methamphetamine addiction was commonplace, had something to do with the reason why Daniel turned to drugs. He seemed bored with his surroundings; seemed to be consistently searching for something to make his life more fulfilling.

Although I knew that Daniel had a problem that had become bigger than he was, I was somehow oblivious to the fact that he was as sick as he was. In the fall of 2009, my parents and I began noticing that Daniel's skin had a yellow tint. I knew that meant that his liver was failing. As it turned out, he had Hepatitis C but because of HIPPA laws, the hospital couldn't tell us that. Daniel didn't want us to know. His legs were swollen. I knew that was indicative of heart and/or kidney failure. I knew he looked sick, but for some reason I just assumed that he would be ok. On Sunday, December 13 2009, I got a call from my cousin saying that we had to get to the hospital, and that Daniel had coded during the night and was on life support; he had been

intubated and no one knew what was happening. Why hadn't anyone told me he went to the hospital? I panicked. I remember driving to the hospital and speeding the whole way.

My mother was in shambles. We didn't understand how this had happened. The doctors gave him a ten percent chance of survival. He had blood clots all through his body, and his kidneys and liver were shutting down from years of Morphine abuse. Mom and I stayed at the hospital for three days, sleeping in chairs and eating out of snack machines. We couldn't sleep, only nod off for a while. Family and friends came and went, bringing us snacks and words of comfort. On Wednesday morning, Daniel's blood pressure was so low they told us they couldn't keep it up anymore. Mom and I made the decision to take him off of life support. We knew that he wouldn't want to live that way, being on a ventilator. There was no more hope.

If someone you love is suffering with a drug addiction, do something to intervene. I suppose that the old saying is true, that you cannot make someone do something if they do not want to, but I feel like we could have tried harder to save him. There were so many signs that told me his liver and kidneys were failing. I knew that from years of working as a nurse's aide. Why didn't we do something? Get him to the hospital quicker? I live with that guilt every day. I don't know if anything could have saved him, but we could have done *something*. Don't wait for things to get better, because they won't. Drug addiction doesn't usually go away on its own; most people need help to stop. I am sharing this story in hopes that someone out there struggling with this same reality can help make a difference before his or her loved one is gone. I would give anything to talk to my brother just once more. I can't bring him back, but I can share my family's story in hopes that it makes a difference in someone else's life.