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## Senate must pass bills to fight tragedy of drug addiction

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I grew up in southwest Jefferson County and was fortunate to have the support, love and care of two great parents and four grandparents. We were taught right from wrong and we are passing those ideals to the next generations of nieces and nephews.

So, when I received a call from my brother in June 2012 saying, "Wes is addicted to heroin," my family's world skidded to a stop.

Wes, my 22-year-old nephew, was the funny, sunny baby of the family. A natural athlete, popular in school, defender against bullies, Wes was just special. When he was 5 years old, I stretched my arms out as far as I could and said, "I love you this much," and he replied, "I love you 10 percent more than you love me." He was a great kid and was becoming a great man.

Wes addicted to heroin? No way.

As a legislator, I thought I was very familiar with drug addiction; one of the very first bills I passed was the certification of drug and alcohol counselors. I had attended countless meetings on the pervasive problem of addiction in Kentucky and that year in Frankfort we addressed the proliferation of meth labs and illegal pain pill clinics through tougher laws.

So later, when law enforcement warned us about the exploding increase in heroin - a cheap alternative to the opiate prescription drugs that had become harder to buy - I was skeptical. Heroin, I thought, was so '70s.

But we were face to face with the grip heroin had on our beloved Wes, and we struggled to understand how it happened.

We believe Wes' addictive tendencies began with a prescription pain medication given after oral surgery. At the time, he worked the twilight shift at UPS and some of his co-workers were abusing opiate prescription drugs. We think Wes missed the "high" he got from the prescribed pain meds, so when his co-workers sent him - while on the clock - to purchase drugs for them and their supervisor, the perfect storm swept him up.

There were few real signs something was happening except that Wes, a legendary saver of money, began running through cash like crazy. Later we found out that when he ran low on money, his supplier introduced him to a cheaper high - heroin.

For months and months, Wes was in and out of treatment: The Healing Place, 12-step programs, The Morton Center. He would detox and stay clean for a while but the addiction would return and the cycle would repeat itself.

In the fall of 2012, he seemed to have kicked it. He was working, talking about returning to Spalding University for his business degree, and was fine at Christmas.

I thought we had made it out of the darkness. But on Easter Sunday, my brother called and said Wes was back at The Healing Place detoxing. Again, he began nightly group counseling with his parents and had individual counseling. Again, it seemed like he was back on the road to recovery.

I spent time with him during this period and I told him I loved him and would do anything to help him.

The last time I saw Wes was on Saturday, May 25, 2013. He and his dad had come over to mow my lawn while I worked in my vegetable garden. We talked about school, babies and zucchini. Wes said he wanted to make fried zucchini like he did as a kid with his older brother. Later I took a plant to his house just for him and his text to me was, "I'm excited. Thank you!"

At 4 a.m. on Tuesday, May 28, my brother called from the hospital and said Wes had overdosed and died.

Why am I sharing this private and still so painful story?

For an entire year, our family kept it private so Wes would not suffer the social stigma of being a drug addict.

I know now that there is terrible shame attached to this illness, but we have to break through the silence to find a cure. I also know that I will search for answers the rest of my life and will focus on what we can do as a state, as a community, to invest in treatment and prevention.

This session, I sponsored two bills relating to addiction treatment.

HB 240 gives greater power to family members seeking involuntary treatment by adding the definition of "incapacitated by alcohol and/or drug abuse" to the statutes. Opiate use changes brain chemistry and abusers cannot make rational decisions about their health and the risk factors. This legislation lets family members speak for them. HB240 passed the House of Representatives by a vote of 94-0.

HB 16 would help Kentucky drug and alcohol counselors assist more troubled citizens by moving their classification from certification to licensure. This change will allow licensed mental health professionals to be reimbursed by Medicaid and private insurance to comply with national changes in Medicaid and private coverage. HB16 passed the House 87-8.

HB240 and HB16 still await action in the Kentucky Senate. I rarely plead for help on legislative initiatives but I have learned through Wes' tragic death that few families are immune to the ravages of addiction and more resources are desperately needed.

Without public support, these two important bills will not become law. Worse, more Kentucky families will endure terrible loss, pain and suffering such as my family has since that phone call on May 28.

Please call your state senator at (800) 372-7181 and ask that they enact HB16 and HB240 into law.

Much like your loved one, our Wes was an amazing young person with limitless potential and we miss him every day. Your calls could help save countless lives and families caught in the agonizing grip of addiction.

Joni Jenkins represents Kentucky House District 44.