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Accidental activist: life changes lead dentist to speak on opioid harms

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By Jennifer Garvin



Precious memories: Sharon Parsons with sons Sean Herman, left, and Michael Herman.

Bexley, Ohio — The knock that changed Dr. Sharon Parsons life came early.

It came around 3 a.m. on Sept. 21, 2015. There are no good knocks at 3 a.m.

This one brought news that forever changed her life: her oldest son, Sean, overdosed on heroin and was dead at 27.

After the detectives who gave her the news left, Dr. Parsons called her son Michael, a few friends, and her mother, Maxine Parsons, who immediately came to her daughter's side. During a break to walk the dog, Dr. Parsons returned to find emergency vehicles in the driveway. Her mother, 78, had collapsed and died from a heart attack.

Suddenly, she found herself with two funerals to plan.

After the funerals and memorials were over, word got out. She spoke to her friend and colleague Dr. David Kimberly, an oral surgeon, who asked what he could do to help.

"Prescribe fewer opioids," she told him.

A month or so later the two ran into each other at a dental meeting. She said Dr. Kimberly thanked her for giving him that directive.

"Do you remember what you said? I took it to heart," she recalled him saying. "

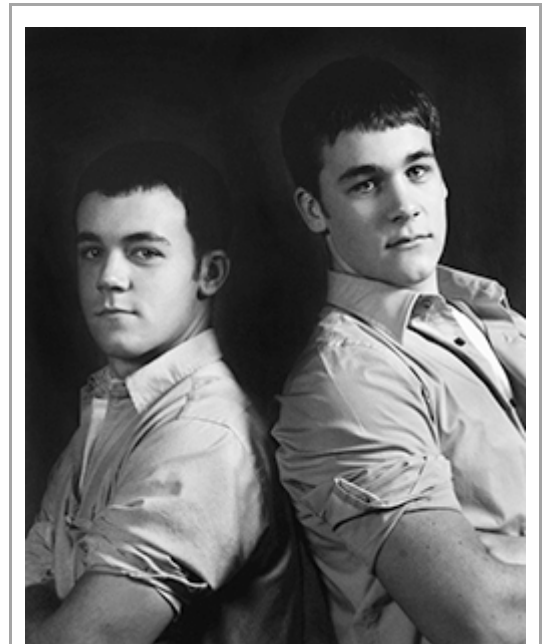
Dr. Kimberly said, thanks to changing his prescription routine away from narcotics, he gets almost "no calls" about pain and nausea.

"We still use them, but only as a rescue medication. Patients and parents are thrilled. The word is out," he said.

Dr. Parsons now finds herself in the role of accidental activist, speaking out whenever she can on the harm of opioids.

"When you've had the worst thing that could ever happen to you, you become a little bit fearless," she said. "At that point in time, you're like, 'What else could happen?' You become a little bit fearless, or at least that's what happened to me."

In 2017, David Owsiany, executive director of the Ohio Dental Association, asked Drs. Parsons and Kimberly to present their insights on opioids to the association's annual leadership institute. Dr. Parsons' remarks were "eye-opening and very well received," he said.



Brothers: Sean and Michael Herman.



Graduation day: Sean receives his diploma from Ohio State University.

Her hope is for all health care providers to prescribe fewer narcotics so that no family has to suffer ever again.

"Dentists hate mandates," she said, "But I ask them, 'Are you good enough to look at your patients and know which ones will be affected?'"

"We didn't learn about this in school," said Dr. Parsons. "We didn't learn about addiction."

Her son Sean's story

The road to addiction for Sean started when he was in college and introduced to opioids after a dirt bike accident. A friend offered him OxyContin to help him get through finals. At first, he didn't tell his mother what happened, but she knew something was wrong.

As younger son, Michael Herman, recalled, once Sean realized he could get the same effect with heroin, "that's when we sort of lost him."

"I don't think he realized how quickly addiction would take grip," he said.

Rehab was a double-edged sword. Sean would go into recovery for long stretches, but he also met others with substance use disorders who in turn, showed him other ways to get high.

Sean's brother's story

At the time of Sean and his grandmother's deaths, Michael was in his first month of dental school at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Dentistry. He took a week off and returned to school still grieving, but without any time to dwell on the pain.

"I knew they wouldn't want me to just focus on my grief," said Michael, who credited his fiancé Mike Bonner for taking care of all of life's necessities during that time. "I just knew that if I stopped moving, I wouldn't start again so I never stopped. I wanted to make them proud. So, I just kept going."



***Lifeline:** Michael Herman, left, credits his fiancé Mike Bonner with getting him through a tough time after his brother's death.*

Fatefully, he'd talked to his grandmother not long after they both received the news about Sean. She encouraged him not to lose focus on his dream of becoming a dentist.

"She told me, 'No matter what, just keep at it. This is what you've dreamt and lived for. Don't let this bring you down.' And for some reason, that stuck with me. It's odd that she had the foresight to say that."

More life changes

The years following Sean's and her mother's death have been challenging but also inspiring. Dr. Parsons has successfully battled breast cancer and also delved deeper into advocacy. She's started a nonprofit — A Voice for Sean — for education and advocacy. In a long interview with [CBS News](#), she talked about dentists' role in stopping the opioid crisis.

"When I talk to groups of dentists I really get their attention, because I am telling them something they didn't realize," said Dr. Parsons, who is vice president of the Ohio Dental Association.

She came up with the name for the nonprofit after meeting several people who were in Narcotics Anonymous with Sean. They told her how much talking to Sean helped them during their recovery process.



Family: Sean and his grandmother, Maxine Parsons.

"They come up to me and say, 'Your son pretty much saved my life.' 'He was helping me get clean.' 'He was having trouble staying clean himself, but he helped me.' 'I had a terrible day and he came over and helped me.' That was a very kind thing of them to do and tell me."

"I think this is something he would want me to do," said Dr. Parsons, who was instrumental in seeing that Sean's dealer was prosecuted in 2017.

"Dr. Parsons has turned her traumatic experience related to addiction within her own family into something positive," Mr. Owsiany said. "Her story is so compelling because it hits so close to home for all of us. And her courage and willingness to share her story in order to benefit others and hopefully prevent future tragedies is really inspirational. We are lucky to have Dr. Parsons in the leadership of the Ohio Dental Association."

Now a third-year dental student, Michael plans to work at his mother's general dental practice after graduation. He's also learning about post-operative pain and the best way to manage it for his future patients.

"It's very important for dental students to learn how to manage pain and also how to handle patients when you tell them they don't need narcotics because a lot of people get upset when you tell them. It's a delicate balance between managing pain and not creating addictions among susceptible populations."

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