

Testimony of Michael L. Straley

My name is Michael Straley.

My wife Robin and I were scheduled to have dinner with our daughter Leah Renee Straley on Thursday, March 1, 2018, at a Delray Beach, Florida, restaurant.

Instead, we had her memorial service in Hagerstown, Maryland.

Leah Renee Straley passed on Valentine's Day 2018. Her cause of death: fentanyl poisoning. She is forever 26.

Every day there is grief.

Leah's addiction started when she was 14 years old - much of it attributed to peer pressure. It started with marijuana, in her case, the drug of choice, and the gateway drug that led to more potent drugs - cocaine, heroin, painkillers and ultimately fentanyl.

We are a middle class family. She was raised in church, had a loving family and friends whose parents were business and shop owners. Addiction doesn't discriminate.

As parents, we were naive to her addiction at first because she concealed it so well. Then the physical signs became apparent. As parents, we wanted to fix the problem. We quickly learned those who are going through the addiction can only help themselves. In Leah's case, she sought that help.

She entered her first detox center - a local treatment facility in Franklin County, Pennsylvania. Our insurance didn't cover the cost. We had to self pay - \$14,000 for two weeks. We tapped into our savings and got help my parents.

We may as well burned the money because in less than a week after her discharge, Leah was back into the addiction cycle.

She graduated high school with honors and received a college stipend to attend a local two- year school. Her major: Drug Counseling.

She never completed that degree. At the time of her passing, she was a first semester junior after starting and stopping her college studies.

She would enter 12 detox centers from age 16 to 26. She lived in at least eight different sober living homes from California to North Carolina to back here in Pennsylvania. Her best treatment was in California where she had nine months sobriety.

I changed jobs and my insurance covered her detox treatments and sober-living home stints. Our home was not the answer for her to return to live permanently. As a father, it was difficult at first to tell her that, but she knew it as well. When she was in a sober-living environment that emphasized community, she thrived. Otherwise, she struggled.

When she turned 26, she was no longer on my insurance. She had to turn to state insurance. She sought out a sober living facility in western Pennsylvania. It was a dump - bed bugs, unsanitary conditions through the house including the kitchen, etc.

She decided she was going to take up an offer to visit a “friend” in Delray Beach, Florida. Leah told us her “friend” was “clean.” They were roommates at the sober-living home in California. My dad and I drove her to the airport on Feb. 10, 2018. I hugged and kissed her before her flight and told her that her biggest fans were at home and that we believed in her - like I had so many times before. She said she knew she was loved. It would be my last hug and kiss from my daughter.

My dad, who suffers from dementia, turned to me in the vehicle and asked simply if we would ever see her again as a single tear streamed down his left cheek. How prophetic was that? Two nights later, Leah called and said her “friend” had invited her boyfriend to move into the apartment. They both had addiction problems. It triggered Leah’s addiction as well. The boyfriend suffered an overdose early the next morning and had to be transported to the hospital. Leah’s “friend” was arrested for an outstanding warrant and possession of cocaine. That left Leah alone in the apartment. She was found by the boyfriend on his return to the apartment in the early hours of Feb. 14, 2018.

I received a call at work - I work at Fulton County Medical Center as the Executive Director of the Foundation - at 9:02 a.m. from the front desk that two Pennsylvania State Police officers were in the lobby and they wanted to talk with me. We entered a private room and it was there they informed me that my beloved Leah was found dead earlier that morning in Delray, Florida.

I don’t remember much about the conversation, but drove myself to Hagerstown, Maryland, to break the news to my wife. I ran out of paper napkins in my truck about half way through the 60-minute drive. We then drove to Martinsburg, West Virginia, to inform our son, Chris. He, by the way, passed last November on Leah’s birthday from a horrific traffic accident. We have lost both our children in a 4.5 year span.

My mom for over a month kept a dish towel on her shoulder. It was constantly soaked with tears.

Grief isn’t the absence of love, it’s proof that love is still there. And it will be always there. My wife and I started Leah’s Legacy Foundation in 2019, a non-profit, committed to helping women in recovery. We provide Leah Legacy purple bags filled with over 40 essentials to women in sober living. We share Leah’s journey and ours as grieving parents. I am a speaker and author (The CALLing) with a focus on schools, with civic groups, at conferences and seminars on the perils of addiction, overdose awareness, and the crisis we have in this country with fentanyl and other drugs invading our communities. To date we have gifted 523 Leah Legacy bags to women recovery. We also have Leah’s Gathering Place, a small house that was part of our family’s, with a houseguest who has over six years of sobriety. My wife started a mini bake shop - Leah’s Cookie Bite Bake Shop - inside the house. We also hold LifeSkill meetings at the home - such topics as Basic Banking, Hygiene 101, Cooking and Baking Basics, etc. for women in recovery. The website is leahslegacy.net.

We have turned misery in a mission. Calamity into a cause. We want to live our life with a purpose and to honor our beloved Leah Renee Straley.

Families are hurting. Families are grieving. In 2021, 29 families lost a loved one to an overdose in Franklin County. In 2022, that number rose to 32. On average, 14 people die EACH DAY of an overdose in Pennsylvania. Over the past decade, we have lost over a half million people to the overdose epidemic in this country.

Thank you for the opportunity to share Leah's journey and ours as well.

Blessings.

Summary of Michael L. Straley's Testimony

- Who was Leah Renee Straley
- How did Leah pass
- How marijuana was Leah's gateway drug
- Leah's Legacy Foundation: What Michael and Robin are doing to help other women in recovery
- The numbers are telling