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Submitted by: Alexis Pleus, Founder and Executive Director of Truth Pharm and mother of Jeff Dugon, lost to an overdose

Written Testimony for the Congressional Hearing on the SACKLER Act

Good afternoon, my name is Alexis Pleus. I first want to thank Representative Maloney for the invitation to be here. Tomorrow would be my son's 35th birthday, and I can think of no better way to honor his birthday, than by being here.

I am an engineer and the mother of 3 sons. We've lived in the same house in the country outside of a tiny village for the past 25 years. My sons all graduated from a high school with a graduating class of about 60 students. They grew up climbing trees, building forts, riding 4 wheelers, playing sports and having dinner at the table every night. When my oldest son Jeff was a junior in high school, he had a devastating knee injury in the first football game of the season. He was determined if he was losing his football season, that he would not lose his wrestling season. He had knee surgery and intensive physical therapy. The doctor told us, in order to manage the pain through physical therapy, Jeff should be sure to take his pain pills every 4 hours. No one told us the risks of those pills. In the evenings if Jeff was limping, or acting like he was in pain, I would even ask him if he had taken his pill. After one doctor's appointment and another prescription refill, I have a vivid memory of Jeff saying that he was afraid he was starting to like the pills a little too much. I remember saying to him, then you should probably stop taking them. I had no idea how hard that would be for him. Jeff did wrestle that year, and made it to the state championships. He also wrestled and played football in college. When he finished college, Jeff got his own apartment, had a job and paid his own bills and I thought we had a successful launch.

Little did I know, Jeff was addicted to opioids that entire time. I didn't know until I got a phone call 7 years later telling me that Jeff had been arrested. I didn't know until I met with the public defender where I declared and insisted on my son's innocence. I said, he doesn't steal, he is a good kid, he has a job, this doesn't make sense. "A lot of things that heroin addicts do, don't make sense," is what the public defender said to me. You could have knocked me over with a feather. When I met with Jeff after and told him what the public defender said, through

choking sobs, Jeff said it was true, that he had struggled with addiction in silence for 7 years not wanting to bring shame on his family.

I was working on a job at Fort Meade on August 5, 2014 when I received a call from my son Jason telling me that Jeff, had died of an overdose. My vivacious, caring, larger than life, family-loving Jeff, was gone. He was 20 months into his recovery including 10 months behind bars for a petite theft crime. Because Jeff had been incarcerated, his risk of dying from an overdose was 18 times greater at that point, than the general population¹.

And now our family will never be whole again.

After losing Jeff, I eventually, I found some online grief support groups for parents who had lost a child to overdose. My mind was blown that there were grief groups specifically for this. At first, it was comforting to hear so many stories like ours. Stories of young people getting hooked on pills either through prescriptions or recreation and then moving on to heroin when they could no longer afford the pills. Stories of stints in and out of jail and a gross lack of help, assistance or effective treatment from grieving parents laden with guilt and pain.

Once several faces were being added to the group each day, I no longer found them comforting. Then I turned to researching about the epidemic, referred to as a heroin epidemic at that time, even though there were more overdose fatalities from prescribed opioids than all other drugs combined. I decided then, 6 months after losing Jeff, to bring awareness to this issue by forming an organization, Truth Pharm. I kept saying that I didn't want to create an organization that ran around picking up the pieces, as an engineer, my desire was to get at the root of the problem. We set our mission to raise awareness, reduce stigma, educate the public and advocate for policy change to reduce the harms of substance use. Our name also showed our intent to raise awareness of the pharmaceutical industry's role in the overdose epidemic and a commitment that we would always tell the truth.

So here I am, 6 years later to bring you some of those truths.

Truth: since losing my son and starting Truth Pharm 6 years ago, another 396 thousand lives have been lost to an overdose². We have come to understand how the Sackler family not only played a role in the overdose epidemic, but were architects in its design. In 2015 the Sacklers hit Forbes list of the 20 richest Americans amassing a wealth of \$14 billion dollars and Truth

1

https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/10.2105/AJPH.2018.304514?fbclid=IwAR1PrxKBwoJz0edsNhvvusiDMbkjLeS4QbZLwWTOKw7PXj7bevffVvSyM_Y&

² <https://www.tfah.org/article/drug-death-rates-continue-rise-during-pandemic/>

Pharm started a campaign "Sacklers killed my baby" showing the faces of those in graves the Sacklers' wealth was amassed upon.

Since then, brilliant light has been shone on the Sackler family's involvement in the design and implementation of a vast overprescribing of opioids in this country for the sole purpose of profit.

Since then, the organization I started, Truth Pharm, has lost 3 of our volunteers to fatal overdoses, Renee, David and Calvin. Calvin was 25 and graduated high school with my youngest son. I attended his memorial service just 1 week ago. At this point, I have very few friends who have not lost a son, daughter, mother, father, sister or brother and I've developed a crippling fear of phone calls.

In that 6 years, my two sons have lost 6 classmates to overdose in a town with a graduating class of about 60 students. In that 6 years, our small Broome County with a population of just under 200,000 residents has lost 303 people to overdose including one girl who was 13 years old. She got a hold of a prescription bottle in a family member's medicine cabinet and took some pills to see how they would make her feel and never woke up. In that 6 years I have met children under the age of 12 who found their parent dead and countless parents who found their child dead. In that 6 years, my close friends and our organization's volunteers Michelle, Dannielle, Diane, Corky, Shelley, Laurie, Betsy, Ralph, Kathy and Theresa have all lost a child. At this point, I have very few friends who have not lost a son, daughter, mother, father, sister or brother and I've developed a crippling fear of phone calls.

Our organization memorializes lives lost to substance use in the Southern Tier of New York through an event, the Trail of Truth, each year. Over the course of 6 years, the list of those we memorialize has grown to over 150 who left behind over 100 children, 300 parents and countless siblings. At this event, I watch children huddle around their parent's hand-painted symbolic tombstone for pictures, I see mothers sit in a fetal position at their child's tombstone and hundreds of community members come out to collectively grieve.

And my intent was to create an organization that wasn't constantly picking up the pieces of a broken system, but with so many broken pieces, what else can we do?

Over the course the same 6 years, the Sacklers' personal wealth continued to grow with \$3 billion in Oxycontin sales per year³. New York State's Attorney General, Letitia James, has shown that the Sacklers' purposefully withdrew \$10 billion dollars from Purdue Pharma to protect their wealth from forthcoming lawsuits⁴.

And over the course of that same 6 years I have watched countless individuals wind up behind bars for the smallest quantity of drugs. In fact, 70% of the people we memorialize at our event had spent time behind bars during the course of their addiction.

We have laws in this country to teach "personal accountability" no matter how petty a crime is. In fact, we even criminalize the illness of addiction even though we know the very definition of addiction is to continue using a substance despite negative consequences and despite the fact that incarceration increases a person's risk of a fatal overdose. This massive War on Drugs has done nothing other than perpetuate harm, cause massive human loss and decimate communities of color. I know a black man who spent 6 years behind bars for having 4 baggies of heroin in his pocket for his own personal use. This past weekend, we held a rally for a 22 year old boy who died from medical neglect in jail. His original charges were criminal possession 7th. For those who don't know, that's the lowest level criminal drug possession charge possible and could be as little as an empty baggie with residue on it, and he died in a jail cell for it.

In 2012, 259 million prescriptions were written for opioids, which was more than enough to give every American adult their own bottle of pills, but we've seen no "intent to sell," no drug distribution and no incarceration for the dealers of those pills.

And the thing we know the Sacklers cared about all along - amassing wealth - is protected. Amassing wealth even at the expense of lowering life expectancy for all adults in the United States for the first time in 50 years beginning in 2016⁵, even at the expense of causing overdose to become THE leading cause of death for anyone 55 and under⁶, even at the expense of taking my vibrant son from me, even at the expense of hundreds of thousands of other families facing the same excruciating loss, even at the expense of creating a generation of children who will grow up without parents.

3

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/alexmorrell/2015/07/01/the-oxycontin-clan-the-14-billion-newcomer-to-forbes-2015-list-of-richest-u-s-families/?sh=38e142b775e0>

4

<https://lawandcrime.com/high-profile/ny-ag-tears-into-sackler-family-over-illegal-transfer-of-10-billion-into-family-trust-funds-and-bank-accounts/>

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<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/12/08/504667607/life-expectancy-in-u-s-drops-for-first-time-in-decades-report-finds>

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/11/29/upshot/fentanyl-drug-overdose-deaths.html>

Somehow, they are free from the effects of the Drug War, they walk away unscathed, uncharged for mass murder, unaccountable as architects of death and destruction. They have changed and impacted our country for generations and somehow, they even get to keep the money they accumulated as a result of it.

It is not for personal gain that I sit here today. Certainly you know, those of us who have lost loved ones will not even get a settlement to pay for the funerals of our sons and daughters. I'm sitting here today with the immense responsibility of showing you the pain of one grieving parent attempting to represent the pain of millions of grieving parents to sway policy and that responsibility is beyond overwhelming. The only comfort I have, is that you also bear that incredible responsibility, to find some way to work towards correcting this injustice and it is one I am sure, you do not take lightly. While Jeff can't be returned to me, nor any of the other lives lost, what we can do is close the loophole that is allowing the Sacklers and others to profit from the death and destruction they have caused. And that, is my sole request to you today.

Sackler Family Quotes:

Richard Sackler, Purdue's then-president, pushed for misleading marketing of OxyContin in other countries; other Purdue decision makers had to talk him down. Sackler is quoted as calling for a "blizzard of prescriptions that will bury the competition."

Kaiko told Richard Sackler that he was "very concerned" by the idea of selling OxyContin as an uncontrolled drug. "[O]xycodone containing products are still among the most abused opioids in the US," Kaiko wrote. "If OxyContin is uncontrolled... it is highly likely that it will eventually be abused."

Richard responded to Kaiko, asking, "How substantially would it improve your sales?"⁷

"You won't believe how committed I am to make OxyContin a huge success," Richard Sackler wrote in a May 29, 1999, email cited in one of the documents. "It is almost that I dedicated my life to it. After the initial launch phase, I will have to catch up with my private life again."⁸

7

<https://arstechnica.com/science/2019/01/family-behind-oxycontin-called-addicts-criminals-while-pushing-pills/>

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<https://www.statnews.com/2019/02/22/a-secretive-billionaires-role-in-promoting-oxycontin-emerges-in-new-documents/>

In 2001, when a federal prosecutor reported 59 OxyContin overdose deaths in one state, Richard wrote in an email to Purdue executives: "This is not too bad. It could have been far worse."

With the realities of addiction and overdose becoming apparent, Richard suggested blaming the patients rather than the company's drug. "[W]e have to hammer on the abusers in every way possible," he wrote in a confidential email. "They are the culprits and the problem. They are reckless criminals."

"These are criminals, why should they be entitled to our sympathies?" a Richard Sackler email quote.