

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on the Judiciary

Hearing on

Challenges and Solutions in the Opioid Abuse Crisis

Testimony of Kristen L. Holman

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February 17th 1996 was one of the best days of my life. My parents brought home the baby brother I had been asking for since I was able to speak. My little brother, Garrett Holman, grew to be one huge-hearted kid who always had the room laughing. His smile was contagious and he always demanded everyone's attention. We grew up in Forest, Virginia and had the best childhood. We were always outside making up games, riding our 4-wheelers, and meeting up with friends throughout our neighborhood. Garrett cared so deeply for everyone he loved. My brother had a bigger personality than words can describe. My brother would be the first one to stick up for someone, he would be the first person to stand out in a crowd, and he would take the shirt off his back if it meant helping someone else. He had the biggest sense of humor and loved pranking people.

Garrett was diagnosed with ADHD very early in life. He was a hyper kid. He consumed every one's energy at all times. When he became of age to make the decision to get off his medications for ADHD, he began to self-medicate.

It started with marijuana. With marijuana, Garrett was able to self-medicate his condition on his own terms. He was able to function without feeling like he was forced to take prescription medicine. He realized that this alternative would not work when he went to get a job and realized he would be drug tested for any job he applied to. This is when he turned to more dangerous alternatives that do not show up on a drug test.

There was no explaining to him the dangers of quitting these prescription medications so abruptly. There was nothing we could say or do that he wanted to hear. We were just forced to watch him choose this path while just hoping and praying he would see the light and reach out to accept our help.

I watched my brother change from an amazing, heartfelt, selfless person to someone I did not recognize. There was a darkness in his eyes and an overall loss of love for life. Not only did I watch my brother change, I watched my parents and then myself slowly fade into that same dark place. The inability to help him made us all feel like we were not doing enough, when in reality we became so heavily involved in him that we all lost ourselves. We lived life never knowing when we would get that one phone call that no one wants to hear.

As a sibling, I was forced to be in a situation that is not the easiest. I played referee between my mom and dad, between my parents and my brother, while often being angry at one or all of them because none of us had the answer. Addiction is a subject that many feel ashamed to speak of and because of this feeling we were left to suffer alone. Close family friends knew of Garrett's addition but no one but the four of us knew the true extent of it. Small talk and events that should be fun became hard. Having conversations with people with the constant worry of my brother and what he was doing and if I would see him again became the only thing I truly cared about.

Living in fear of loosing my brother everyday played a major stress role in my life. I constantly dropped everything to be wherever I needed to be for Garrett and my family. I

spent hours and hours trying to talk to him trying to let him see how much love we all had for him.

Garrett was angry with himself over his addiction. He wanted to be happy and he couldn't. He tried so hard and when he lashed out at us it made it that much more hard for him. He couldn't help it.

In December of 2016, I received the news that my brother had overdosed. My dad revived him and he was sent to the hospital. I remember getting that news and dropping everything and rushing to the car. When he finally woke up and we told him how lucky he was that he was still alive, he didn't even blink. He wasn't thankful, he wasn't relieved and that's because he was already gone. My little brother was not the person looking back at me anymore. I didn't recognize this person and I couldn't understand why he wasn't hugging us and crying tears of excitement over getting a second chance at life.

My family knew we needed to do something drastic, we needed outside help. Our normal interventions were no longer buying us time with my brother. We needed a solution and an action plan. My parents forced him into a mental health evaluation, which he was only required to stay at for 5 days. After the 5 days he reluctantly went into a 30-day in-house treatment program. One week after he was released, my dad found him overdosed again and revived him once more. My dad forced a second evaluation but the judge released him on Feb 6th 2017. I lost my little brother and only sibling on Feb 9th 2017 to a synthetic opioid that was delivered straight to him in the mail from China.

I cannot explain why this happened to my brother. I don't know how to fix it and I don't know what my family could have done differently. What I do know is that drug addiction did not just take the life of my brother but it took a big piece of my family's life. There are empty silences in conversations where he should be present and there is a fight in all of us that still does not want to give up and I don't believe it ever will.

Garrett wasn't just a good person he was a great person who fell into a terrible trap that none of us could get him out of though we tried and tried and tried. My family feels that we failed Garrett, but the truth is, this is something that millions and millions of families are dealing with. People feel ashamed and they don't want to speak out about what is going on and that just leaves people to suffer in silence.

Although it is too late for Garrett, he is in my heart and head every day and it only feels right for him to reach people at a national level. I could not be anymore inspired at this point to do whatever I can do to reach out to other families like mine.