

Mom still taking punches after son's overdose death

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There are many, many hard parts about losing a son - especially the way Carol Labzda lost a son - so it's impossible to determine the low points of the afterlife.

But the newspaper a week ago Thursday was right up there.

"Court's reversal on trafficking may cut doctor's term in half," read the Oct. 4 headline.

"It takes me a few days to recuperate," says Labzda, 57, whose son, Michael - her beautiful young man who loved fishing, surfing and gardening - died from an overdose of the painkiller OxyContin in 2001.

"Over the next couple of days, I go back over every little detail. Upsetting is not even the word. Devastating is not even the word.

"I just get weary of seeing his name linked to that."

Carol Labzda was married 25 years with two kids when her son, the oldest of their children, died from drinking, taking Xanax and snorting powdered OxyContin. Michael Labzda's death was a big deal locally because it was the breaking point in the medical career of Denis Deonarine, a former doctor who's serving prison time for repeatedly over-prescribing addictive drugs to addicted patients.

Cases like this - Michael Labzda's death led to Deonarine's disgrace on charges of drug trafficking, Medicaid fraud and racketeering - have afterlives of their own, mostly through the courts.

Carol Labzda knows this now.

She'll will be humming along, trying to maintain, working as a foreign language teacher at The Benjamin School in Palm Beach Gardens, when the past rudely pops in and slaps her around.

Like last week.

There she was, drinking her coffee, when she saw the story. "It's hard to miss it when it's on the front page," she said.

Deonarine's prison sentence - he's not scheduled for release until 2029 - could be drastically reduced after the 4th District Court of Appeal ruled that a trafficking charge he'd been convicted of wasn't trafficking at all.

It's a technical kind of thing, but the point is this: Each legal step, each little ruling, each time this happens, Carol Labzda gets sucker-punched.

"As a parent and as a teacher, we try really hard to keep our kids away from drugs," she said Friday. "But it's much harder when there are physicians - I'm not naming names - who hand them out like candy."

Young man with addiction

Michael Labzda was 21, still living at home and studying horticulture at the community college, when he died in February 2001.

He'd never been seriously hurt in a car accident.

He didn't have a bad back.

What he did have was an addiction - and it was being fed by a doctor who didn't mind writing prescriptions. After Michael Labzda's death, investigators seized Deonarine's office records, and that evidence eventually resulted in his lengthy prison term.

The appellate case of the former Dr. Denis Deonarine is legally pedestrian, really, unless you are the mother of Michael Labzda, a handsome kid with a cheerful face and a nice childhood.

"Sometimes I look back at all the wonderful, innocent days," she said Friday. "Fishing and flag football and hanging out with his dad."

Heartbreaking - which is why it's nice to bring you the amazing part of this story, a twist of fate that shows the strength of the human spirit.

Trying to reach others

Carol Labzda, now divorced - their son's death was too much for the couple's long-standing marriage - has taken her grief, and she's put it to good work.

"You get hold of a grieving parent and, if they believe in something, there's so much energy there," she said.

Labzda hooked up with Narcotics Overdose Prevention and Education. NOPE. And she goes into schools and talks to students about drugs and addictions.

She talks about the phone call and the drive to the hospital and how she got to hold her dead son when he was still "beautiful and warm."

She talks about the sweet, handsome boy who loved fishing and surfing and the smell of good earth.

"I will remember my son's death," she said. "But I will always remember my son's wonderful life and who he was. That's what I will hold onto."

Even when the past pops in and slaps her around. Time and time again.

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