

SHE WATCHED HER DAUGHTER DIE: Melissa Santiano was young and had a zest for life, but heroin and cocaine changed that

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First in a three-day series.

WEYMOUTH - Linda Cunningham returned to Weymouth in February. But it was anything but a happy homecoming. It was the worst five days of her life. Cunningham spent that time at South Shore Hospital, watching her 18-year-old daughter die of a drug overdose.

Melissa Santiano died on Feb. 15, days after her boyfriend left her, unconscious and alone, at the emergency room entrance of the Weymouth hospital.



Melissa Santiano

Cunningham is one of the people left behind in the wake of an epidemic of opioid abuse in the region. Whether it's heroin, OxyContin or fentanyl, people are falling victim to addiction in increasing numbers. And dozens of them are dying, just like Melissa.

Some days Cunningham finds herself in the second-floor apartment she shared with her daughter in East Bridgewater, just waiting for the sprite of a girl with the streak of purple hair to reappear. Those are the days she clutches the two silver lockets she wears around her neck that contain Melissa's ashes.

"I don't know how you let go," Cunningham said.

An autopsy revealed that Melissa died of a combination of heroin and cocaine.

Cunningham got the call at work; a relative told her Melissa was in the hospital and in trouble.

"I knew when they told me, 'Go to the family waiting room.' I knew it was bad," she said.

When she saw her daughter in the hospital bed, Cunningham said she felt like her own life was draining away.

"Five days in the hospital, just watching her go from limited brain stem activity to no brain activity, it was like watching her fighting to stay alive ... The whole thing was just so unnatural," Cunningham said.

Her daughter was not unlike most kids on the South Shore, she said. Melissa mostly stayed out of trouble, until the drugs took over and she seemingly lost all control, her mother said.

When Melissa was a little girl, she attended pre-school in South Weymouth, played soccer, took dance and clarinet lessons, and had a strong will, her mother recalled.

When she was in the seventh grade and she and her mother lived in Rockland, Melissa decided she wanted to join the boys wrestling team.

"She was a girl who had all the self-esteem in the world," Cunningham said.

As a young teen, Melissa liked to draw -and dress as a “goth” - all in black. She dyed her hair purple, then dyed it back to its normal color when she went looking for a job.

“She said she was born to be purple,” her mother said.

A few weeks before she died, Melissa visited Disney World in Florida with relatives. Cunningham cherishes a picture of a giggling Melissa from the trip.

“She was full of life,” her mother said.

On a hallway desk inside her apartment, Cunningham keeps the silver urn that contains the rest of her daughter’s ashes.

“I can’t bury her,” she said. “Not yet.”

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