

## The dark abyss of drug addiction

Laurie doesn't want others to suffer the fate of her son

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She plays cards with the guys at the detox centre and tells them about her son.

The son she couldn't save.

She was 16 when she had Ben. A kid with "a sweet heart."

She took him to the beach when he was eight months old. Plunked him down on the sand. He crawled away from her for the first time.

"I cried," says Laurie Miller. "I felt like he was leaving me."

Ben grew up in Thunder Bay loving fishing and hockey but caring little for school. There were trouble spots. He drank. Smoked weed. Dropped out in Grade 11.

Laurie split from Ben's father and once, Ben broke into his dad's house and partied.

Another time, Laurie got a call from the ER. Ben -- 18 now -- had done seven hits of acid.

"He was higher than a kite," she says, curled on the sofa in her beautiful Waterdown living room. "I just remember sitting there rubbing his hair and waiting for it to end. It was a really long trip."

That scared Ben.

For a long time, he seemed to be on the straight and narrow.

He roomed with a bunch of guys, preferring a string of dead-end jobs to going on welfare.

In his early 20s, he got his trucker's licence. He put it in a frame.

"Life started happening for Ben," says Laurie.

By this time, Laurie had moved to Hamilton with her second husband. Ben called every couple of weeks and they'd have long chats.

When Ben turned 28 the calls changed.

"It wasn't nice to talk to him on the phone anymore. He was cranky. He was rude. He was belligerent. He was different."

After a year of this, there was a late night call.

"I'm addicted to a drug," Ben said. "OxyContin."

It's a powerful prescription painkiller that is highly addictive. Designed to relieve terminally ill cancer patients' pain when it came on the market in 1995, the time-release pills were hailed as a miracle. But doctors began prescribing them to manage chronic pain in non-terminal patients.

Oxy seeped onto the street and was dubbed Hillbilly Heroin.

Users chewed the pills to release all the ingredients at once, or crushed and snorted them or dissolved and injected them.

Ben had hurt his back rescuing a snowmobile that went through the ice on a northern Ontario lake. His doctor prescribed Tylenol 3s.

When he ran out of those and the pain was still there, Ben didn't go back to his doctor for more. He didn't want to be labelled a drug addict.

So he bought Oxy from a dealer. Then couldn't function without it.

He spent his paycheques on it. Sold everything he had to buy it.

Three times he tried to detox himself. But the diarrhea, nausea, cramps and chills were more than he could bear.

He was desperate for help when he told his mother.

"I understood the allure of that drug," says Laurie. She had been prescribed OxyContin after having surgery and remembered the warm, happy feeling it gave her.

She promised to help her son.

Laurie got him a spot at a Toronto-area detox centre. But it would be a month before Ben could start.

He wasn't able to wait that long.

On Nov. 30, 2004, Ben killed himself. He was 29. He did not leave a suicide note. Just his OHIP card propped against an illegal bottle of OxyContin.

Laurie wrote letters. To politicians. Newspapers. Purdue Pharma, the U.S. maker of OxyContin.

She demanded accountability. Wanted triplicate prescriptions and a patient databank to make it more difficult for people to get their OxyContin prescription from more than one doctor.

A long letter back from the executive vice president of Purdue refers to "the unfortunate death" of Ben, but then goes on to espouse the merits of OxyContin for three pages. The letter was written before three of Purdue's top executives pleaded guilty to misleading the public about the drug's risk of addiction and before the company was fined \$634.5 million.

Laurie was frustrated and realized she was going to have to start at rock bottom.

She began volunteering at the Men's Withdrawal Management Centre in Hamilton. Many of the guys there use Oxy. She tells them Ben's



Ron Albertson, the Hamilton Spectator

story. She listens to theirs.

Laurie also works weekends at The Living Rock, and says she makes a special point of connecting with street youth who talk about Oxy. She tells them about Ben.

And Laurie hasn't stopped there.

She dropped out of school in Grade 9 and went on to raise four kids.

After Ben died, she went back to high school and got her diploma. She's currently halfway through a two-year social work program at Mohawk College. She is also taking addictions courses at McMaster University.

Laurie is 50. She plans to one day be a detox councillor.

"I'm going to try to help one person if I can."

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