

Shattered Lives: Drug use damages individuals, families

BY JESSICA ISAACS News Herald Correspondent | Posted: Monday, April 20, 2015 12:00 am

While addiction is often considered an internal struggle, the story of one local family proves that drug abuse creates a disastrous ripple effect in the community. They're speaking out now, working to help others understand the dangers of substance abuse and what it takes to stop it.

As part of a family affected by addiction, local resident Whitney Wade, 26, said drug abuse touches people of all ages and from all walks of life. Many of the people who struggle with it are those the community would least expect, she said — “People you'd just never imagine.”

“This isn't just happening to the homeless person on the street corner, as it is often stereotyped,” Wade said. “Drug abuse is happening everywhere — street corners, doctor's offices, straight A students and top athletes. I've met orthopedic surgeons and pilots who were addicted to pain medicine.”

Her father, Scott Wade, was recently featured in an awareness and prevention video created with community support by Burke County Sheriff Steve Whisenant. In the video, Scott explains that, when faced with the onset of addiction, his family didn't know what to do or where to turn, and therefore suffered dark and tragic consequences. Wade said her family has chosen to be a part of the sheriff's ongoing campaign because they hope to spare other families the heartache they've fought, and are still fighting, to overcome.

NEVER GIVE UP

Wade knows all too well the feeling of hopelessness and what it's like to reach the end of the rope. But no matter how difficult it is to care for someone who struggles with addiction, she said it's imperative that families and friends never give up on their loved ones.

“As the sister of a sibling who has struggled with addiction, I cannot even begin to explain how easy it is to give up, and throw your hands in the air and say ‘just forget it’ out of anger and pain,” she said.

“But, had everyone who has surrounded our family throughout the years of addiction turned their backs, walked away and said ‘just forget it,’ my brother wouldn't be here today. We have had so many “angels, as I call them, along the way.”

While giving up is never the answer, Wade said she's a firm believer in tough love.

“Helping an addict and enabling an addict are two different things. In fact, cutting an addict off and loving them from a distance is sometimes the help they need,” she said. “Every situation is different. I will never turn my back on someone wanting help and actively trying.”

Letting people know that there is hope for substance abuse is important, Wade said, and it's important to "never lose faith in better days ahead."

"When dealing with substance abuse, and loving an addict, it's so easy to feel like life won't get better, and to feel like there's just no hope for the addict that you love," she said. "Addiction creates so much stress, hurt and tension in a family and brings the monsters out of everyone around the addict. But there is hope."

While help is out there for those who need it, Wade said it's also important for those facing addiction to make a commitment to doing what's right for them and for the people in their lives.

"I have seen addicts walk through the storm and come out better than ever," she said. "But I have also seen the exact opposite, where an addict lost hope completely, didn't get the help needed and lost his life."

To overcome the darkness, Wade said an addict must go through treatment, find the help they need, find a higher power and make a decision to never let themselves go back. But she thinks it is equally important for everyone who has been affected by addiction to receive help of their own, to learn to heal from the hurt, and pain it has caused them.

SPEAKING OUT

The Wade family learned that keeping their experience locked away will prevent them from helping others in similar situations, and they've now chosen to tell their story in hopes of making a difference.

"For many years, I stayed quiet about my family's struggle with addiction, as did my parents. We would basically sugarcoat the truth for everyone, including other family members," Wade said. "I think this was because we were embarrassed, hurt and so sick of talking about it.

"In an odd way, we thought that if we sugarcoated the truth and made it sound better then, magically, reality would be better. Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way."

Once they chose to be open and honest about the challenges they were facing, the Wade family realized that there were others in the same boat.

"Once reality was accepted, surprisingly, it became easier. You realize you aren't alone and, in many cases, someone or another family has it way worse," Wade said. "At the same time, you realize you wouldn't wish the pain and stress of addiction on your worst enemy. Sharing my story may help others, while, at the same time, it helps me." Wade said her family believes in the mantra, "To help yourself, help others."

"If one person can make the right decision when faced with the decision to use drugs, or not to use, then my goal has been accomplished," she said. "Also, if one family in pain due to loving an addict can be helped, my goal has been accomplished."

LESSONS LEARNED

Wade said community education is important because substance abuse “can be so easily overlooked in its earliest stages,” as it was in her family — “so easily accepted, and so easily justified.”

“No one ever thinks that a straight A student, who is being looked at by Division I schools for football, could be an addict,” she said. “Looking back, my parents — who were blind to the pain pill epidemic at first, as so many people are — would agree that now they can see the signs.”

Every aspect of the community plays a role helping people understand the risks associated with prescription drugs, Wade said, including parents, teachers, law enforcement, social services, mental health facilities, pharmacies, nurses, doctors and more.

“Many are under the impression that if the doctor prescribes it then it’s okay to take,” Wade said.

“Many, especially younger kids, do not know the risk that they could be taking.”

Wade hopes that speaking out will “prevent the curious, peer-pressured young individual from making a bad decision that could cost them years of their life, if not their entire life.” She wants parents to know what to look for and to be active in their children’s lives, and she wants to help others who love an addict.

“We want younger kids, teenagers and adults (who are tempted to abuse drugs) to realize it isn’t something to mess around with — that they are jeopardizing what could be a lifetime battle, for themselves, and the ones that love them, that could be avoided altogether by making one choice,” she said. “One bad decision can lead to a lifetime of regret. Most addicts become criminals and most criminals are good people who have made horrible choices.”

For many people facing addiction, “one pill *is* one too many and a thousand is never enough,” Wade said, and she hopes that people of all ages will understand that “one choice can become a lifelong disease, and battle”.

Isaacs, Jessica. “Shattered Lives: Drug use damages individuals, families.” *THE NEWS HERALD* 20 April 2015. Web.