

Joint Senate Task Force on Opioids, Addiction & Overdose Prevention

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Remarks by Lauren Mandel

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In 1998, when I was a young nurse working for Pius XII Substance Abuse Program, which is now Catholic Charities, and I did a health assessment on a 14 year old girl. She was a Heroin addict. "It's coming back", my more experienced colleagues told me, "Heroin is back and it's taking hold again". At 27, with two babies, I was stunned that a 14 year-old beauty could have been addicted to anything, never mind Heroin. But as in all things that don't affect you directly, my life went on. I was happily raising my boys, Zane and Max, with the backdrop of my work as a Community Health Nurse. Our family was active in volunteering, caring for others, and social issues. I never wanted to be the mother that stuck her head in the sand. Our family grew with all the usual joys and challenges until September 4, 2017, when my 22 year-old son died in my home of Opioid Overdose. So here I am today, before you, humbled to be invited to speak to the NYS Opioid Task Force and I thank you for the opportunity to testify to this health emergency in our midst.

**I am going to repeat that: my son Zane, my beautiful boy, died in my home and I could not save him.**

So here I am today, before you, humbled to be invited to speak to the NYS Opioid Task Force and I thank you for the opportunity to testify to this health emergency in our midst.

Timing in life is everything and in my son's case it was very bad timing. I called to get a substance abuse evaluation for my son during his winter break from Siena college on Christmas Eve, 2015 but I hit a brick wall. Even though I have great health insurance, I am a member of

the mental health system, I am white, I am educated, I am middle class, there was no help for us. In 2015 Family Navigator's did not exist, treatment on demand did not exist, education about the recreational use of Opioids did not exist. Perhaps if these services were available things would have been different. So although I was not aware of what was ahead of us, Zane was part of this opioid epidemic and now our family was too.

Timing again worked against us, because 2016-2017 was the largest spike of Opioid related deaths in our state, as synthetic opioids flooded the illegal drug market. Zane was Number 56 in Orange County, there were 76 people that died of overdose in 2017. His autopsy revealed that he had 100% Acetyl Fentanyl and Xanax, no Heroin. The presence of synthetic opioids have changed the trajectory of recovery because when people relapse, they die.

I realized Zane was in big trouble about 2 weeks after he'd come home from graduation from Siena college as a BSW. He was evaluated by a Social Worker at Catholic Charities and although he informed her of his drug use history, including opioids she recommended their outpatient program. He completed their 6 week out-patient program with flying colors (he was a social worker after all) and he overdosed in my home 5 weeks later.

The Medical Examiner shared with me that Zane died within seconds of injecting the drug he thought was heroin. He did not plan on dying that early Labor Day morning, he sent a text only minutes prior to a college buddy making plans for the upcoming weekend.

In my opinion, traditional outpatient treatment did not work for Zane, although when I shared his story with the Commissioner of Mental Health in my county, she said, "Zane's treatment was a success, but relapse is part of recovery." **I will never agree that a dead child is a successful treatment outcome.**

My family had a Tsunami wash over us. My community of friends and colleagues were flooded as well. One of us, the helpers, the caregivers, the volunteers, the givers had lost a child. This shock propelled us to action, in a way that amazes me. We knew that our story and the energy of Zane's spirit could not be so easily snuffed out. **It just was not fair.**

Keep It Moving was born out of the shock wave of Zane's sudden death. Keep It Moving is an organization that works under the umbrella of The Community Foundation of Orange and Sullivan County with the mission of assuring Narcan is in every purse, backpack and first aid kit, and providing financial support for young people to stay engaged in healthy, life affirming activities to avoid the pitfalls of our culture: such as substance use, violence, and poor coping skills.

Since February 2018, Keep It Moving has done over 3000 Narcan trainings in bars, street corners, churches, synagogues, fire houses, community days and businesses. **Our grassroots program is part of the solution.**

We have given out over 300 holiday stockings to orphaned and homeless children in need in Newburgh and Poughkeepsie areas. The First Annual Keep It Moving 5K succeeded in bringing a diverse community together for health, Opioid Awareness and to raise money to support our efforts.

In the Spring of 2020 we will launch Into the Woods, a collaborative project with Wild Earth, providing an evidence based Nature Program for 10-15 middle school students in the Newburgh Area. Keep It Moving will do this without a funding source, as we are 100% volunteer run and rely on donations from community members.

There are many things the Senate can do to help.

- The Senate can make, grants available for little organizations that do big work. \$5,000.00 goes a lot farther in a grassroots organization, than a large million dollar not-for-profit. Keep It Moving can send 15 young people to the Into the Woods Program for \$5,000. We need grants that are accessible to organizations that do not have expensive grant writers but do good work as part of the solution.
- The Senate can secure monies for programs with creative treatment options that target 18-24 year olds. Engaging them in treatment using technology, nature, physical activity, volunteering and support without shame are part of the solution. New interventions need to start today. This epidemic will not peak until 2025 and too many people will die.
- The Senate can provide funding opportunities to create services for outreach to families of an individual who has overdosed and survived. They need to have Narcan and know how to use it. Families affected by opioid addiction want to help their loved one and keep them alive until they find recovery. Offering support to families without judgment or shame helps reduce overdose death by keeping the person who is misusing opioids connected to their families. Most people who die of overdose die alone. This is not a time to do what we have always done, it's not working for a lot of people.
- The Senate can require that large not-for-profits working in the areas of prevention and treatment of substance abuse disorders collaborate with families and individuals using opioids to make programs meaningful and successful. An example of what happens without collaboration is having an Opioid Awareness Day event in the City of Newburgh, in the middle of a work day, inviting service providers without outreach to families. Who has been made aware of opioids? No one the timing is off.

I thank you again for hearing my testimony today, as a mother, a nurse, a community member the founder of Keep It Moving.