

Lisa BRANDY

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Since 2013, the number of heroin overdoses in Sarasota County has quadrupled. The rate of fatal opioid overdoses grew 300 percent in 2017 over 2016, due to much stronger and more deadly synthetic opioids fentanyl and carfentanyl. Sarasota County now has the second-highest rate of fentanyl deaths in the state, second only to Manatee County.

Nationwide, 116 people a day die from opioid-related drug overdoses. But one, only one statistic matters when it's your child who has died. When she lost her daughter, Brandi, to drug addiction in 2011, Lisa took action and created Brandi's Wish Foundation to help others going through what she and her family experienced.



(left to right): Yudi Carpenter (Silver Lining Social Chairperson), Kelly Erwin (volunteer), Gigi Kovach (Board Member and Silver Lining Social Chairperson), Lisa Brandy, Laura Leeming (volunteer and former Board Member), Ro Marchese (Board Member), Shelley Polechko (volunteer)

The numbers are staggering: nationwide, 64,000 drug fatalities in 2016 with 66% involving opioids. By way of comparison, the number of American lives lost in the entirety of the Vietnam War totaled 58,200. Closer to home, there were 2798 opioid fatalities in Florida in 2016.

Since 2013, the number of heroin overdoses in Sarasota County has quadrupled. The rate of fatal opioid overdoses grew 300 percent in 2017 over 2016 due to the introduction of the stronger and more deadly synthetic opioids fentanyl and carfentanil. Sarasota County now has the second-highest rate of fentanyl deaths in the state, second only to Manatee County.

While the U.S. has declared a state of emergency, nonetheless 116 people a day die from opioid-related drug overdoses. But one, only one statistic matters when it's your child who has died.

We meet at Lisa Brandy's home in Sarasota. A painting of her daughter hangs on the wall and offers a kind of silent witness since we will be talking a good bit about her. A few feet away on the couch her mom, an intense and well-versed advocate for drug education, leans forward and shares her story even while her phone lights up nonstop. She only glances at it when we pause and states that it (the phone) is probably going to "blow up."

Such is the way for a woman who meets with desperate parents whose children have drug problems. She also meets with the kids themselves. She knows what they're going through. If that's not amazing enough, Lisa founded Brandi's Wish Foundation (www.brandiswish.org) the same month her daughter Brandi died in March, 2011. Lisa has a very active and motivated board and volunteer team—and most have been touched personally by a loved one suffering from addiction.

Lisa's daughter, Brandi Shea Meshad (Lisa changed her name to her family name, Brandy, after her divorce from Gavin Meshad. So no, Brandi's name was not Brandi Brandy) would have been 26 had she lived and one wonders where she'd be and what she'd be doing. Lisa, pauses, then responds. "I still feel she's with us ...just in a different form. I still experience her." And it's Lisa's strong desire that other families not experience the heartache that she and her family had to go through.

Lisa not only founded Brandi's Wish, but she's also testified in Tallahassee over the years. She was active in fighting to have Florida's pill mills shut down as well as the passage of the Good Samaritan 911 Bill (passed in 2012) that allows for a "person acting in good faith who seeks medical assistance for an individual experiencing a drug-related overdose may not be charged, prosecuted, or penalized..."

When easier access to naloxone came up in legislation, Lisa was also active in seeing it passed though it had to be extremely hard to witness. Her daughter could still be alive today if she had access to naloxone. (Naloxone is an opiate antagonist. In the event of an overdose, naloxone can be administered immediately, and reverses the overdose by blocking the brain's opioid receptors.)

Florida passed House Bill 751, known as the Emergency Treatment and Recovery Act, and it went into effect on June 10, 2015. The law permits medical professionals who are permitted to prescribe drugs to prescribe and dispense naloxone to a patient or a family member, friend, or other person who has contact with a person at risk of opioid overdose. It also permits those people to administer naloxone in an emergency.

The law also permits emergency responders (law enforcement and EMTs) to possess, store, and administer naloxone in an emergency. The drug does not induce a high and is harmless to those not overdosing.

Lisa is quoted in an article as saying, "Hospitals and EMS have been using it, we just want more public access for families of high risk people when an overdose is happening," she said. Showing her grit and determination, Lisa testified to plead for naloxone being more accessible even when the date closely aligned with the 4th anniversary of Brandi's passing.

This past March (2018) legislation was written into law allocating \$65 million to combat addiction. And, this past May, Lisa was in Tallahassee again to support Florida's Attorney General in suing the nation's largest opioid drugmakers and distributors. She and others feel drugmakers, et al. are responsible for fueling an epidemic that she says is now killing 15 Floridians a day.

Brandi's Wish's mission is: "to raise awareness through education and offer preventive solutions to teens and their families regarding the dangers of prescription drug misuse



and abuse. We believe that every teenager can achieve their wishes and dreams for a healthy and successful future by living a drug-free life. We believe the deaths that occur from the misuse and abuse of prescription medications are preventable. We believe we must change the way communities perceive addiction and the victims of this disease and proactively work to educate children, parents and community members to remove the stigma associated with it."

Brandi's Wish offers "scholarships" for families who are stymied by the high cost of treatment. Residential treatment, for example, can cost as much as \$25,000 or more for 30 days—that is, if your insurance covers it. The Foundation's annual tennis tournament raises money plus they have their Silver Lining event and both go towards helping families.

The Foundation web site also says, "We understand that not all families have insurance or financial means to help their loved one get the life saving treatment that is needed to detox and heal from substance abuse. One of our missions at BWF is to try to make this possible for those who truly need and want to get well... Recovery is possible and families do heal."

Understandably, it's hard to discuss the loss of her daughter and the struggle the family went through dealing with Brandi's addiction, recovery, relapse, then passing. But Lisa's candor will amaze you. Brandi didn't die from street drugs. Brandi became addicted to prescription opioids in high school. Her concerned parents had her in a 90-day wilderness therapy program and then enrolled Brandi into a therapy-based boarding school that treated not just the addiction, but also the behavior. Things were steady until the holidays came around (although holidays are major stressors, Lisa notes) and she relapsed. She detoxed again and used drugs and died.

Lisa knew little about addiction back then, but they mobilized quickly when it became serious. She voices the irony and tragedy of being proactive and having resources, but that it was "18 months from start to finish... we still lost her."

Like many teens, Brandi smoked marijuana. One of her friends introduced her to what are called "roxies" (Roxicodone, often called "roxies/roxys" or "blues" is one of the brand names for oxycodone, a powerful and highly-addictive opioid prescription painkiller.). They took them to get high and Brandi also took them to help her sleep. Brandi struggled trying to stay off the drugs and would go on and off. As often happens, depression and anxiety set in. And she isolated herself from family and friends. It wasn't behavioral. The drugs were taking over. After those two successful stints in recovery, Brandi had finished high school and was accepted to the University of Alabama and was set to start in the fall of 2011. Life was looking much better. Then sobriety and lapses came and went, but in March, Brandi used drugs and tragically died.

While the public is much more aware about the opioid problem, misconceptions persist. There is no "good addiction" (prescription drugs) versus "bad addiction" (heroin). Addiction is addiction and, as Lisa notes, it can take over your life in as little as three days. The stigma, she says, "is out there. People think it's a choice." Working with families like a recent teenager and his family who "have experienced hell on earth," she asks, "How do you heal? Sometimes we don't have a choice. I get to love her [Brandi] seeing these kids and helping them get well. I didn't have a choice."

Her daughter's death, she says, "broke my heart and it can never be mended. It's a gaping wound. I miss her so desperately." Her daughter, she feels was her "greatest teacher...she taught me love, mercy, empathy and compassion." And that will live on forever in Lisa's work helping others.

For more information, to help, volunteer or seek support, visit www.brandiswish.org. 

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