

Narcan, gas cards, new laws: How a Stearns Co. dad waged fight against an epidemic

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ST. AUGUSTA, MINN. — The worst day of Dan Pearson's life — Christmas 2006 — started when his oldest son didn't answer his phone.

Justin Pearson had come over the night before, but his dad could tell the 24-year-old had relapsed into his opioid addiction: The slurred words, the grogginess, the hazy eyes. Justin was embarrassed to be around family on Christmas Eve, so a friend took him back to his house in St. Cloud. The next day, Pearson called and texted his son, again and again, before driving to his house.

His son lay in the garage, dead from an overdose after a tormenting two-year roller coaster of addiction.

"I sat there and held my son in my arms for a couple hours in a cold garage on Christmas Day," Pearson said.

Tragedies like this have broken an untold number of parents during a national opioid epidemic that's taken 400,000 lives since 2000 and kills more than 130 people a day, according to the National Institutes of Health.

While Minnesota's opioid problem pales in comparison to certain states — it had 7.8 opioid-related overdose deaths per 100,000 people in 2017, compared to 49.6 for West Virginia and 39.2 for Ohio — it's enough of a crisis here that Gov. Tim Walz signed a bill this year to increase fees on prescription drug manufacturers and distributors to pay for prevention and treatment.

The scope of the problem can seem overwhelming, especially to a parent in mourning. But even though he says nobody can know the sorrow of a parent losing a child — Dan Pearson still visits Justin's gravesite each morning — he did not retreat into inaction.

Within a couple of weeks after Justin's death, Pearson began writing to state legislators. That led to Justin's Law, which requires Minnesota doctors to have face-to-face consultations with patients before prescribing opioids, among other things. He started a foundation in his son's honor. He purchased gas cards for local drug courts to help addicts get to treatment. And three years ago Pearson, who owns PleasureLand RV Center, purchased 60 doses of Narcan, a nasal spray that can suspend the fatal effects of an overdose, for the Stearns County Sheriff's Office. This year Pearson bought another 60 doses — at about \$80 apiece — for other police, fire and ambulance agencies throughout central Minnesota.

"It's literally a question of life or death," said Stearns County Sheriff Steve Soyka. "Heroin's not just a big-city problem, and abusing pain pills isn't just a big-city problem. We're sometimes the first ones there in small towns. It takes a while for the ambulance service to get there."

Accident, then pain pills

The phrase Justin Pearson lived by was "Go big or go home," for better or worse.

He was a kind soul: When a longtime security guard at the RV dealership said his dog had died, Justin bought him a dog statue.

He was a troublemaker: As a teenager, Justin pestered that same security guard by sneaking into the dealership at night and hiding among the RVs.

He was an obsessive: He so adored his 2000 Pontiac Firebird Trans Am that he tricked it out with chrome rims, enormous subwoofers and a nitrous oxide engine.



He seemed primed for big things: He was internet sales manager for the RV business, and his dad hoped he could be part of the third-generation ownership.

And he was an addict, someone who could not say no to opioids — despite three emergency room trips for overdoses and three stints in treatment, despite jail time and Narcotics Anonymous meetings.

The addiction started after Justin crashed an ATV in 2004, an accident that ruptured his spleen and broke his clavicle. As he recovered, doctors tried to wean him off the Vicodin, but Justin's demand only increased. When the doctors cut him off, Justin turned to the internet. He used 17 different websites to get drugs, including the infamous Minnesota-based Xpress Pharmacy Direct, whose owner, Christopher Smith of Burnsville, is serving a 30-year federal prison sentence.

It's a familiar story. Three-fourths of people who get into heroin or fentanyl start with prescription painkillers, according to Dr. Chris Johnson, chair of Minnesota's opioid prescribing work group. "That's what changes their brain."

Justin's descent was rapid. He'd recover for a month or two, then he'd relapse. When Justin mixed Vicodin and Xanax, "that was a train wreck," his dad said.

Once, they stood together outside the Hazelden treatment center in Center City. A FedEx truck pulled up. Justin instinctively walked toward it: The pull of feeling another shipment of pills was coming.

A pill for everything?

After Justin's death, Dan Pearson says, he got mad at God. But his faith ended up deepening.

"There's something bigger to what took place," said the 59-year-old grandfather. "I don't know what it is, but there's a purpose. And the purpose for us isn't just getting upset, crawling into a corner and saying 'poor me' for the rest of our lives."

Pearson's activism has tangible effects — things like distributing Narcan, or helping St. Cloud State University develop a sober housing program, or drug takeback events in St. Cloud.

But more important, he said, are the intangible aspects. Dan Pearson believes the opioid epidemic can't be solved with a law here or a new treatment center there. It will require a shift in mind-set: Society believes there's a pill for everything, but then shuns anyone who abuses pills.

He knows that some people are skeptical about trying to help "druggies."

"I've had people say, 'Why would you give them Narcan? They're probably going to just go use again anyway.' So I say, 'Why would you do chemotherapy? Because you might get cancer again.'"

Dan Pearson wants chemical dependency recast as a disease instead of a choice. For him, Narcan gives a chance at redemption and at beating the disease.

"I want people to know they're being given a second chance," Pearson said. "This is our way of knowing that Justin can live on."