

THE OPIOID CRISIS: THE COMMUNITY RESPONDS

Writing through the pain

By LAURIE LOISEL
For the Gazette



"That is heroin. The eraser, the slate wiper. Emotional anesthetic. Love, sympathy, forgiveness, truth and beauty all in one fantastic lie. The warm embrace."

Those powerful words are an excerpt from a piece written by Thomas Miklovich as part of a writing group for people whose lives have been impacted by the opioid crisis. I had the privilege to facilitate that four-session group in November.

Participants included parents whose adult children struggled with opioid addiction, including some who had lost the battle, as well as younger people at various stages and on various paths of recovery. Like Miklovich, they had lots to say.

Hampshire HOPE teamed up with the Academy of Music for what might seem an unlikely collaboration, resulting in a set of writing groups whose members bravely and boldly wrote about the harrowing toll opioid misuse has taken on their lives. The project aims to harness the arts to raise awareness about the opioid epidemic, possibly increasing understanding and reducing the stigma associated with the disease of addiction, which can be a barrier to people seeking help.



About 30 people — including Rebecca Labrie, above, and Frank Petrolati, above right — took part in writing groups about how the opioid crisis has impacted their lives. The experience culminated in a reading and reception at the Northampton Recovery Center last month. SUBMITTED PHOTOS/LAURIE LOISEL



Some of the pieces written in the workshops will be read on stage at the Academy of Music before the March 22 and 23 production of “(In)Dependent: The Heroin Project.” SUBMITTED PHOTO/LAURIE LOISEL

The project came about after Academy Director Debra J’Anthony and her board decided to bring the play “(In)Dependent: The Heroin Project,” written by Kent State University students Emelia Sherin and Zach Manthey, to the academy stage in March. The play portrays the opioid/heroin crisis through the voices of characters, including people who use drugs, their family members and friends, and depicts heroin as a character throughout the play.

J’Anthony was eager to use the play to spark wider community discussion and, as she put it, “to inspire those in our own community who have been impacted by this nationwide epidemic to write their story, put their voice on the page in hopes to reduce stigma and build compassion and understanding of this epidemic’s power and challenges against humanity’s resilience and hope.”

J’Anthony reached out to J. Cherry Sullivan, coordinator of the Hampshire HOPE opioid prevention coalition, pitching the idea that the coalition could offer writing groups to the people impacted by the epidemic as an ancillary project to the play. After reading the play, Sullivan jumped on the idea.

“I knew right away that this would be a play that would evoke so much emotion,” she said. “Enhancing the production of this play by bolstering the voices of people within our community is an opportunity to spark deeply needed conversation.”

That was how, in November, about 30 people in writing groups held in Belchertown, Northampton, Greenfield and Springfield, took up pen and paper to write about how the opioid epidemic manifested in their lives. Some of the pieces written in these groups will be published in a book that will be distributed March 22 & 23, when “(In)Dependent” is presented on the Academy stage. In addition, some of the pieces written in the groups will be read on stage prior to the play.



Judy Ryan, a retired teacher and facilitator of one of the writing groups, reads a piece by a participant, as other writers look on. She said she “got to know a group of seven courageous men who shared their experiences honestly and openly.” Submitted photo/Laurie Loisel

One of the groups met at the Hampshire Jail and House of Correction, where seven men spent four Sunday evenings writing alongside facilitator Judy Ryan, a retired teacher who lives in Florence. Ryan said she was humbled and inspired by the depth of the writing she heard from the writers.

“I learned a lot working on this project. It gave me a better understanding of addiction and the struggles those affected by this disease are facing,”

she said. “The best part was I also got to know a group of seven courageous men who shared their experiences honestly and openly.”

Easthampton resident and harm reduction educator and activist Albert Park facilitated a group in Belchertown at the Nest, headquarters for the grassroots group SOAAR, Speaking out About Addiction and Recovery. Gretchen Krull, Voices from Inside program director and volunteer coordinator, worked with writers enrolled in VFI writing groups for incarcerated or formerly incarcerated women to write on prompts relating to the topic.

As facilitators, we had invited anyone whose lives have been affected by opioids, including friends and family of users, people in recovery and people actively using to join our writing sessions. While we encouraged participants to consider submitting what they wrote for publication in a book connected with the production of “(In)Dependent,” we also said submission was not a requirement, or even the sole focus, of the groups.

Facilitators invited participants to write from the perspective of different people impacted by the opioid crisis, using passages from the play as writing prompts. The parent of someone struggling with addiction, for example, wrote from the perspective of a person using opiates and opiate users found themselves writing from the voice of a person who loves someone using opioids.

We didn’t know what these prompts might evoke, but we encouraged people to write and share about these topics only if they felt safe doing so. Given the charged topic, we knew being comfortable would not be part of the equation, but we were hoping they would feel safe and supported in whatever they wrote.

Two months after the final meeting of the group I facilitated, I find myself still thinking deeply about what transpired. I was moved to the point of tears more than once by the depth and honesty in the writing. People wrote about feelings many people try desperately to avoid, ignore or escape: pain, grief, powerlessness, shame, regret, loss, anguish. They told stories and shared burdens.

These lines from two separate pieces written by Belchertown resident Sheryl Holmes about her experience with her son Caleb, who died in May of a drug overdose, offered a glimpse into the helplessness and heartbreak felt by parents of people suffering from drug addiction: “*The hardest secret I tried to keep was the fact that my son was addicted to drugs.*”

“I see you soft tender boy caged by the demons that grip, and tear, and lie to you... I am afraid for you.”

Another writer in the group vividly depicted the thinking that can precede a relapse, which addiction experts say is part and parcel of the recovery process: *“I’ve had friends OD, so I’m not going to let that happen to me. Just to get me over the hump — I haven’t slept well in months, in forever. I just need a little relief, then I could start fresh. Tomorrow I could deal with life. ... I could probably use just once. I could use just once in a while — like I used to.”*

Though the group was short-lived, it went deep quickly; relationships blossomed and connections formed.

Talk about reaching beyond our differences: I witnessed what seemed to be a deepening of understanding between people caught up in the cycle of addiction and the people who love them.

Of course, the burdens described in their writing did not go away, and nobody expected they would. But it’s possible those loads became easier to bear.

It’s possible each was changed in some way by the connections made. They were stronger. They were not alone. That’s what connection does.

Some say it’s the real antidote to addiction.

Tickets to “(In)Dependent” can be purchased at aomtheatre.ticketfly.com *Laurie Loisel is director of outreach and education for the office of Northwestern District Attorney David E. Sullivan and a member of the Hampshire HOPE opioid prevention coalition run out of the city of Northampton’s Health Department. Members of the coalition contribute to a monthly column in this space about local efforts underway to address the opioid epidemic.*



Sheryl Holmes of Belchertown reads from her work. Holmes’s son Caleb died in May of a drug overdose, and her writing offered a glimpse into the helplessness and heartbreak felt by parents of people suffering from drug addiction.

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Will Oldershaw, one of the participants in the group offered at the Northampton Recovery Center, reads from his work. Submitted photo/Laurie Loisel

