

Testimony of Sharon Kempa
June 2, 2016

Good morning. My name is Sharon Kempa. I am here today to talk to you about my son Kyle.

I never thought Kyle would get involved in drugs. I thought that the lessons of our family members would be a lesson. His father, my former husband, was an abusive alcoholic, and he has not been a part of Kyle's life since he was 7 years old. His uncle, my brother, is also an addict who abused pain pills and alcohol until he overdosed at the age of 50. My brother lived in the upstairs apartment of my father's home, and Kyle and my daughter Kristen only really knew him as the man who lived upstairs. I wanted to protect my children from that world.

I tried to protect them from all of the bad. I don't know how Kyle's using got past me. I thought I was on top of everything. People think that when a child is doing drugs, then their family must not care about them, they must not be loved. But in my home, even into high school, Kyle had to be home before dark. I knew all of the tell-tale sign of drug abuse. I had seen it in my own family, but still he was able to hide it from me.

Kyle started using when he was in 8th grade. Around that time, I decided to take Kyle and my daughter to have random drug tests done by their doctor. Kyle did not know it was coming and I didn't suspect anything at that time. It was a precautionary thing. I had seen so much of that sort of thing in my family, I just wanted to make sure. Before we got the test results back, he told me that it was not going to come back clean. He had started using marijuana. Later, he told me that at some point that wouldn't do anything for him anymore. And so he began to look for something better.

When he was 16, I hurt my back and was proscribed Vicodin. I didn't really use any of the pills. Eventually, I realized that the bottle of Vicodin was missing from the cabinet. When I asked them about it, both he and his sister swore they hadn't taken them. Once again, I never expected them to use with the history in our family. He didn't look like he was on anything. I had seen my brother and his friends abuse the same substances. I had seen the signs. He hid it really well. With Vicodin the same pattern repeated itself; at some point it just wouldn't do anything for him anymore.

It was at that point that Kyle was introduced to heroin. Kyle has always felt like his life was horrible. He often felt hopeless. He told me once, "I know you did everything you could, and it's not your fault, but nothing made me feel good until this." (This being heroin.)

It is true that Kyle's life has not been easy. When he was four, Kyle was diagnosed with Guillain-Barré syndrome, an extremely rare disorder in which your body's immune system attacks your nerves. He began physical therapy at that time.

The next year, when Kyle was five years old, I left Kyle's father. His father was alcoholic and both physically and verbally abusive. His father put him down, told him he couldn't do anything. I believe that the verbal and physical abuse of his father had a big impact on Kyle who was already struggling with a physical disability and because of this seeming different from other people. I think that these factors led Kyle to be very angry and upset. He always had trouble dealing with these feelings.

I knew leaving his father was a big thing, a big change in his life. After we left, I tried to provide structure for Kyle and his sister. When I first left his father, I would take him to counseling. The woman we saw would ask me how I thought he was doing. I would say, why don't you ask him that, but she never did, and so we stopped going. Kyle was a cub scout. He took CCD classes. But it still got him.

In school, Kyle slipped through the cracks of the system. From the second grade I told his teachers that he had trouble with his assignments. They all brushed it off and continued to pass him to the next grade level. When he was finally tested in 9th grade, they found that he had a learning disability and that he was at a 5th grade level across the board. He was able to do basic math, in reading he would see the first few letters and assume the rest. When they finally came to realize, as I had, that there was a problem they were all very helpful, but it was too late.

In 2012, I got a call from my daughter, Kristen. She told me that Kyle had thrown the coffee table at the wall in our home and that she was scared. I came home and told him that he had to leave. He said he would have to live in the woods, that he would kill himself. I told him that he was killing himself anyway, and that I wasn't going to sit around and watch it.

At that point he agreed to go to rehab. He went to White Deer Run for 30 days. After that period, they didn't call, they didn't tell me he was coming home, they just dropped him on my doorstep.

He wasn't clean for long. He started working at a local restaurant, and met the woman who became the mother of his son, Ethan. Within the year Ethan was born and they had moved in together.

It took nearly three more years before he realized that he needed help again. We were looking for help but no one seemed to care. We finally came to Representative Aaron Kaufer's office. I feel that without his help Kyle wouldn't be here today. Three days into rehab Kyle's best friend ODed. I know that if he hadn't gotten into rehab he would have been using with his friend that day.

Kyle had to wait three days before White Deer Run was ready to be accept him. During those days, I thought he was going to die. I watched him, wrapped up in blankets, shaking and shivering. If you've had the flu, where you couldn't move or function, that's how his life was. If I had something to give him I probably would have just to ease his pain. It is horrible that there wasn't something available to him. Those three days felt like a month.

Kyle was again at White Deer Run for 30 days. After that, I would have liked for him to have been sent outside of the county so that he would be far away from the people he used with, but he went to a transition house in Wilkes-Barre. During that time, Kyle was very positive. He felt like his life had meaning. Everyone there was in the same position as him. The transition house gave his life organization and structure. While he was there, he would stay in touch with me daily.

After three months Kyle had to leave the transition house, despite the fact that he and I wanted him to stay. Insurance would no longer cover it, and we could not afford to pay on our own.

His reentry into the real world was difficult. To start with, he had nowhere to go when he got out. I live in Luzerne County public housing, and because Kyle has a criminal record from an arrest for possession of a controlled substance two years ago, he is not able to be put on my lease. For the same reason, he is not eligible for public housing on his own.

He stayed with his son's mother for a while, but had to leave there. After that, he stayed with different friends. Unfortunately, some of these friends were people he used with in the past.

He also had issues finding employment. When he was able to find work he wasn't able to get the hours he needed to make enough money to take care of himself.

I could tell that his feelings of worthlessness were coming back. He was trying hard to live. He felt that whether he was clean or high, his life was still bad. And when someone is weak, there is that guy on the corner who knows that you're weak and is waiting for you.

Everybody has a trigger point. Everyone has their own way of dealing with the stresses of life, and coping with the day to day. Food is mine. A food addiction is an addiction. I am going through the same thing with him. Heroin seems to be the only way that he found to be able to live his life.

He made it out in the world for six months. As of last week, I know that he is using again. I am not sure where he is living and I have not seen him or heard from him in weeks.

I am always living on edge, wondering what is going to happen next. He feels like he has nowhere to go. Where else do you go? For him, the easiest and cheapest thing to do was to go back to the same guys as before. And he did. And now we are back to square one.

If there is one message that I can leave you with, it is that Kyle is a person. He is a son, a brother, a father. People look at him and think that he is just a druggie, that his life doesn't matter. That these are the choices he made and so he has to live with the consequences. I say to them that Kyle suffers from a disease. Look at it this way: When someone has been in a terrible accident, you don't just send them home after a certain period of time. They have to go through rehab and learn how to do everything over again. In the same way, I believe that we cannot just send people like Kyle back out into the world after a certain period of time, in this case three months, and expect them to succeed after their own kind of terrible accident.

Drugs were such a major part of Kyle's life that he never learned how to deal with living. He got up, he got high, and he somehow managed to make it through his day. He wasn't living, he was existing, and just barely. He had to be taught how to live. And I believe that his time in the transition house was teaching him this. They tried to adapt him into real world living. But just like someone receiving physical therapy, not everyone recovers at the same rate. After three months, he knew he was not ready to be out in the world. He knew he had not yet recovered fully. It is like we told Kyle to start walking without crutches even though he still had a broken leg.

We have to make sure that people like Kyle can get the help they need for as long as they need. We need to come up with a gradual reintroduction program so that people aren't left to start living on their own after never having really lived before. We have to make sure that someone is there to help when they feel like they have nowhere else to turn and to let them know that they are not alone. We need to provide people like Kyle guidance and to help deal with the day to day stress and living. They don't know how to cope with the pressures of paying bills and of child care, of making sure there is food on the table each and every day. They need us to help, and to hold their hand until they are ready to walk on their own.

Thank you.