

Mary Sampey
Connellsville Catholic Community

My name is Mary Sampey, and I am the Director of Evangelization for the Connellsville Catholic Community, which includes the parishes of Saint Rita of Cascia, St. John the Evangelist, and Immaculate Conception. My passion is to create vibrant faith communities throughout the Diocese of Greensburg that will go out and serve their broader community. Presently, I am working with Bishop Malesic's Drug Advisory Board, as well as Fayette Drug and Alcohol, CYS, and Highlands Hospital in order to raise awareness of the drug epidemic. I am also part of the Stand Up and Choose Tour which is an anti-bullying, anti-drug, life affirming presentation. It has been to area middle schools, including Connellsville, Laurel Highlands, Albert Gallatin, Mt. Pleasant, and Elizabeth Forward school districts. In May, we will visit the Uniontown school district. Our Churches have also collaborated with parishioners and Connellsville Counseling Services in order to begin offering Nar-Anon and Grief Support for those experiencing the loss of a loved one due to addiction. These groups are open to the public.

Almost every single day, I am approached by someone in my community who has been personally impacted by the drug epidemic. Many times, there are children involved. It is our mission to provide a source of hope for those in this incredibly hopeless situation. I ask myself, "How are we, as Church and community, responding to the drug epidemic?" "What resources are there in our local community and parishes?" Unfortunately, much of my passion and purpose in this area has come out of my own personal experience.

On December 7th, 2016, my sister, Angela Marie Phillips, died of a drug overdose. She was 34 years old. I grew up right here in Fayette County in an extremely close family. My sister, two brothers and I were all loved and well taken care of. We all went to Catholic school. We were very involved in our Church. We all grew up and got married. My sister has two children.

About four years ago, my sister began having health issues due to an autoimmune disease. As a result, she was put on prescription pills for her pain and she became addicted to them. That situation led her into rehab. It was inside the rehabilitation center that she met a man that would later introduce her to heroin. After only a brief couple of months of using heroin, she returned to a clean life for three months, before dying alone in a hotel room from a fentanyl-laced heroin overdose. We were shattered.

On the day of her death, I will tell you that I was very calm because I thought, "She can't use again. She can't hurt herself again." She was truly in a prison of her mind that she couldn't get out of. She hated herself so much, and now she didn't have to hate herself for what she had done to all of us or to her kids, and she was at peace.

What I want everyone to know is that addiction is a disease. Angela did not choose this. No one chooses to be a drug addict. Angela might have chosen to use that first time, but after that, it wasn't in her control.

I also want everyone to know that addiction is a family disease. Even though one person uses, the entire family is affected. It is painful beyond belief.

On the day I lost my sister, I also in a sense lost my parents, as they are now the legal guardians and primary caregivers of my two nieces. I am no longer considered one of my parent's children, but rather, another caregiver and the only other means of support my parents have for these two precious girls whom I love as my own. I cannot begin to express the feelings of isolation, lack of support, and stigma associated with raising two children that have lost a parent as a result of an addiction. I cannot begin to put into words the difficulties and the pain of grieving your loved one while at the same time, attempting to walk a parentless child (whom you love) through their own grief. No one should ever have to tell their loved one that they are never going to see their Mom again.

On this journey of helping to raise my nieces, there have been many questions that they, along with my own three children, desperately want to know and which I simply cannot answer. There have been many tears. There have been moments of anger mixed with deep sadness as I watch my nieces experience moments in which they say, "I wish my Mom was here." One thing is for certain; they had a mother, a wonderful mother...and neither I, nor my own Mother will EVER be her.

I have had to watch, almost helplessly, as my parents' world has been turned completely upside down. They are no longer grandparents. That role has been stolen away from them like a thief in the night. They are now Mom and Dad again. The physical, emotional, and mental effects that this has had on them and our family are immeasurable.

On the contrary, we feel incredibly fortunate and blessed that my parents have physical custody of my nieces. We can thank my sister for that. While she was still alive, she as the primary custodian joined with my parents and made sure that they were granted physical and legal custody. Unfortunately, there are countless grandparents and guardians who are raising children as a result of this epidemic that are not so fortunate.

From my standpoint, I see a society that wants the grandparents and extended family to do the work in raising the children affected by addiction, and yet, a legal system that does not provide these caregivers the rights they desperately need. The legal system should recognize grandparents as parents in these situations. In many cases, grandparents are considered secondary; even when the biological parent or parents have absolutely no role in the raising of that child or children. We also need to provide legal liaisons for the grandparents, so that they have the legal support they need as they navigate through this. Finally, we need to consider the fact that these grandparents may or may not have a family or community support system. They may be elderly or experience health issues of their own. They may or may not be receiving financial assistance. The state will be taking care of these children into adulthood unless we give them the help and resources they need now.

At the same time, I am encouraged by the work that I see being done on the state and county level. I see people who genuinely desire to create change. I see communities coming together for a common purpose. I see the stigma of addiction dissipating, and empathy increasing. There is hope. I share our story to raise awareness and to encourage other families to open the dialogue with each other and with the leaders of our community. Together, all of us can work toward decision making that is in the best interest of the children who are the true victims of this modern epidemic.

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