

Bearing Witness
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On November 1st of this year, we witnessed the sentencing hearing of J, the young man who sold Sophie the fentanyl that killed her 2 years and 9 months ago. We reheard the events of that Tuesday - not that we had forgotten any details - all entered as testimony. Her text trail with J was read into court. We listened to the report of the paramedics' attempt to revive her, probably an hour or more after her heart had stopped. We had been invited to prepare victim impact statements, which were read aloud by our very compassionate victim services worker. We looked the young man in the eye. We had known him ten years ago when he briefly dated Sophie. We were all crying.

Glad seems like an inappropriate word to use to describe any of this; *grateful* would be an overstatement, *relieved* doesn't quite cover it. We are glad to have said our piece. We are glad to have been seen - by the judge and the lawyers, the court reporter, the news reporter, and the defendant's friends and family. We are glad to have heard all the ways in which J has turned his life around since March 2020. He was addicted to drugs then; he is not now. He confessed to his actions the minute he was arrested and we witnessed his remorse in court. We both said in our victim impact statements that to imprison this 34 year old man would do him a great deal of harm, and achieve nothing. This is not to say he is blameless. Accountability and punishment are two different things. Sophie's death may well have saved J's life. What would be the point of risking it again now?

In the winter of 2020, Sophie was not in "active addiction" and, as far as we knew, was not regularly seeking or accessing illegal drugs. She was taking plenty of legal prescription medication. The difference seems arbitrary. After a rough day, when she'd hit another roadblock in her search for the right kind of care, she acted in desperation. J must have seen how ill and vulnerable Sophie was to request fentanyl. She absolutely knew the risk she was taking. He had to know the risk he was exposing her to, though he was using his own product at the time, and was affected not only by poor judgement but by delusions.

It's important to note that "overdose" cannot accurately be described as the cause of death when any dose of street fentanyl can be fatal, and any substance can be laced with it. Its victims are poisoned. The thing about toxic, unregulated drugs is that there is no chance to reconsider. Back in the days of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll, a person could take an unpleasant trip and opt to

avoid that substance in future. As those on the front lines of harm-reduction bluntly state, dead people don't recover.

We saw from evidence the police openly shared with us that Sophie didn't intend to die that night. In fact, in a text to J, she thanked him for the drug that had momentarily taken away her pain, perhaps for the first time in months. We received some messages too, telling us she loved us. Then she took some more, and the texts stopped.

Whether she would ultimately have succumbed to her complex mental illnesses, no one can say. She had spent her short adult life doing everything in her power to survive. She was engaged to be married. She had almost finished her undergrad degree in social work, an incredible accomplishment given how many times illness forced her to take time away from her studies. She was helping others with the same challenges she had, as a volunteer with a number of community health agencies.

There were periods over several years when we were scared we were going to lose Sophie. Her severe depression had sometimes resulted in self-harm. There were days when we were afraid to answer the door in case it was the police. But this particular Tuesday was not one of them. Of course no one is ever really prepared for the death of a child or sibling, even if their prognosis is not good. One of the most catastrophic and confounding things about Sophie's death was just how random it felt. After so much effort in her long battle with illness, after she had dedicated herself so wholly to her healing... in a flash, she was gone. It felt unfathomably unfair.

Sophie died right before the world shut down during the first Covid wave. We weren't even able to have a proper memorial. We were 5 provinces apart until it was safer to travel and we were able to reunite for a few weeks in the summer of 2020. The global emergency situation made it possible for us to spend the next year living together, since all of our previous plans regarding jobs, studies and childcare were upended. Alone, we would have had even more difficulty starting the slow journey from grief to mourning.

We have some opinions that we think would align with Sophie's.

It makes no sense to make J the scapegoat for this cascade of impacts on our lives. The crown wants to see him behind bars for 3 years, entirely as a symbol of the devastation caused by fentanyl. Of course it's devastating. We're up to 21 opioid deaths per day in Canada, a 91% increase since the pandemic began. The devastation continues unabated because governments are either indifferent or squeamish about taking on such a political hot potato.

We are not the victims of one particular criminal offence, but rather of a series of interlocking and deeply inadequate health services, systems and policies which failed Sophie repeatedly. She could not find or access the treatment she needed for the debilitating physical and emotional symptoms of her illness. In fairness, the research lags behind. Our understanding of mental illness, including addiction, seems akin to our understanding of transmissible diseases before germ theory. We wish brain scientists godspeed in their work.

There is , however, plenty of scientific evidence that tells us what *not* to do: push addictive drugs onto patients out of sheer corporate greed, criminalise drug users, and cling irrationally to the failed strategy of prohibition. It has never worked, and it never will. Decriminalising simple possession, providing safe supply and funding harm-reduction programs, which Pierre Polievre is going about dismissing as “woke” leftist policies, are proven data-driven strategies for immediately saving lives.

Other people’s children have been sold poison by callous, criminal drug dealers. Other families have been treated very badly by law enforcement and the justice system, their children's lives dismissed as meaningless because they used drugs. We are only too aware that our experience in the aftermath of Sophie's death could have been much worse. We have met many other families who have lost loved ones to the opioid crisis; we support and listen to each other.

We are all furious.