

We Were Here: Rachel, Mike, Ben, Devin, Alex, Jordan
Mary Fairhurst Breen
June 2026

These are the six stories I collected and wrote about young adults across Canada who have died in the current opioid crisis, as part of my We Were Here series.

There are two other parts to this project: eleven stories I wrote about teens and adults under 30 in Ontario who died of fentanyl between 2019 and 2024 (which also became short animated documentary films), and six stories I wrote about Canadian men who died of AIDS a generation ago.

Rachel Balfour

Regina, SK

October 2000 - February 2019

The story of Rachel's birth has always been a family favourite. At a regularly scheduled appointment, Heather's doctor advised her to nab her husband and dash to the hospital, as her baby was arriving imminently. Heather had not felt so much as a twinge. They rushed to the local hospital, where Heather was told to sit tight because they had to make way for an emergency patient coming in. So she sat waiting until her doctor burst through the door and said, "What are you doing here? Let's go!" Heather *was* the emergency patient. Rachel arrived thirty minutes later. Heather's boss joked that she didn't need to take mat leave, just her regular lunch hour.

Rachel's older sister Taylor had arrived two years earlier after a more traditional twelve-hour labour. The two girls were complete opposites but adored each other. Taylor was very vocal and extroverted, Rachel was quiet and reserved. She idolized her sister. They did all the classics together as little kids: skating, swimming, Brownies. As teens, their interests diverged. Taylor was all about language, while Rachel enjoyed facts and figures.

Rachel also had a creative side, with a talent for music. She practiced where nobody could hear her, becoming proficient in trumpet, oboe and guitar. Although she didn't enjoy attention, she lit up while performing in school concerts. She put herself out on a limb by trying improv, but ultimately preferred being backstage doing tech and lights.

Rachel excelled in school, but hated it all the way through. She was exceptionally shy. She was also very private. Despite its overwhelming popularity among teens, social media was anathema to her. She didn't like having her picture taken, much less posting it online.

In high school, Rachel experienced depression and anxiety and sought treatment, though she didn't tolerate the medication prescribed to her. She also tried therapy, but due to the counsellor's workload, Rachel was only able to see her every 4-6 weeks, which proved too sporadic to be helpful.

She pushed on, fulfilling all her high school requirements six months early. Then she spent an extra term taking additional courses to improve her odds of getting into a top university for computer sciences. She chose the University of Alberta in Edmonton and went off to her first year, living in residence. Without offering a lot of detail, she reported to her parents that she was enjoying university life.

Rachel had a very specific and clear plan for herself. She loved drawing as well as all things STEM, so she was going to start her own business developing animation software and employ other talented computer geeks. Her sister pursued an English degree, and the two would joke that Rachel would have to bankroll Taylor's literature habit.

Despite her intense shyness, Rachel was always willing to speak up for others and would approach strangers on the street to offer help. Taylor says she learned compassion from her sister and makes a point of living by her example.

Rachel came home for the Christmas break in December 2018, and the family did all the usual holiday things. There was nothing about Rachel's behaviour or mood to cause concern, though she was a bit preoccupied by a make-up exam she had to write when she returned to campus. When her family saw her off at the airport after New Year's, they had no idea it would be for the last time.

Heather had a long phone conversation with her daughter on a Friday in early February. They talked about what they'd do during a visit over Reading Week. They had a lengthy debate about whether Rachel should see about having her teeth straightened by an orthodontist in Edmonton or back in Regina. It was a conversation extraordinary in its ordinariness. Then Heather's messages went unanswered over the weekend and into Monday. By Tuesday, she was frantic and called the dorm, asking someone to check on Rachel. Hours passed. Then four Regina police officers came to the door to report that Rachel had been found dead in her room.

Everything was a blur for a long time after the initial shock. Months later, the coroner's report showed that Rachel had a lethal amount of fentanyl in her system and some evidence of previous drug consumption, but there was insufficient information to draw any conclusions about a history of substance use. Rachel left no clues. Her parents can only guess that she was self-medicating to ease her stress, and have had to accept that they'll never really know what happened to their brilliant, ambitious daughter.

Since Rachel's death, her family has honoured her in various ways, usually around her birthday in October. One year, they held a fundraiser in partnership with a local restaurant, raising over \$3,000 for Canada Learning Code, to help support other computer scientists in training. Taylor has published a book of poetry dedicated to her sister

(<https://pegasuspublishers.com/books/taylor-balfour/at-least-we-ll-always-have-spring>).

Heather has had the courage to speak to the media and accompanied her MP to the House of Commons to address the opioid crisis last year. You can watch her interview on CBC News prior to the most recent federal election (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8siVc9yNe6w>).

Michael Brott

Vancouver, BC

December 1984 - July 2020

Miranda couldn't help but observe that Mike seemed to find any excuse to pop into her office and chat. She was in a new job with a Vancouver film production company, where he was employed as a driver. She was immediately drawn to him, appreciating how easily he put people at ease, and how attentively he listened to her. For their first date, he got them tickets to see the Canucks, Miranda's first hockey game. She had recently arrived from Australia. Mike was originally from Toronto (and a diehard Leafs fan). Miranda enjoyed how appreciative he was of little things she did for him. She noticed that he saved notes and keepsakes from their early days together.

By moving to Canada, Miranda's plan was to get a foot in the door as a screenwriter, then make her way to LA. Events conspired against that, starting when the US cancelled the green card program that would have allowed her to work there. She and Mike had talked about getting married to allow him to move with her, but the disruption in their emigration plan didn't change that. He proposed on a beautiful winter day at Wreck Beach. A month later, everything shut down due to Covid, so they ended up with a seaside Zoom wedding in April 2020, dressed in bride and groom hoodies. There were only six people on the beach, with their friends and

families watching from multiple time zones. One advantage of the digital ceremony is that Miranda has footage of the beautiful toast Mike gave.

“It started raining on me this morning while I was running, but we stuck with the plan, and sure enough, it’s a beautiful almost cloudless day out here. We’re in some pretty scary times right now with this virus, but it got me thinking about just staying the course and taking care of those you love. The sun will always come out. Mazel tov!”

Their honeymoon period - and in fact their entire marriage - was spent in lockdown, both of them out of work while film production was on hiatus. It was a strange but precious time when they could focus on one another. There was lots of hiking and paddleboarding for their physical and mental health. Mike tinkered with his motorcycle, customizing it and fawning over it to the point they often joked he loved the motorcycle more than Miranda. He dabbled in photography and made YouTube videos where he interviewed people he found interesting. He DJ’d for an audience of one: his new wife.

In an effort to replace some of their lost income, Mike took up day trading, which may have been too close to gambling to be safe for someone in recovery from addiction. Miranda knew that drug dependence had been part of Mike’s past, but he assured her that it was no longer an issue. On the day he died, he had made some trades that lost money, which Miranda believes may have triggered his relapse.

Miranda was completely shocked to find his body in their washroom, and couldn’t imagine what had caused his death until the police surveyed the scene and explained that evidence pointed to drug use. She has to constantly remind herself to accept what she didn’t know at the time. Immediately afterwards, she felt like she was on the world’s worst scavenger hunt, trying to piece together his history with addiction and come to some kind of understanding about what Mike might have been going through. She learned he had been on suboxone (a harm reduction medication) but weaned himself off it, perhaps at the wrong time, given the ensuing stress brought on by the Covid pandemic.

Miranda is still writing in various forms but is no longer attracted to the hectic life of a Hollywood film career. She facilitates a grief support group for people who have lost a partner to a drug-related death. She has also started a [website](#) and [newsletter](#), where she shares her experiences as a young widow. In 2025, [a personal essay](#) she submitted to the Canadian Nonfiction Collective took third prize in a national competition. She explains her urge to write:

When I was 35 my beloved husband died from an unregulated toxic drug supply. It altered everything irrevocably. I found myself dealing with a traumatic loss that affected everything in my mind, body and soul in a world that didn't understand.

Here I share my grief experience and some of the hard-earned truths I've discovered along the way. If you've lost someone, I'm sorry, and I hope this helps you to feel seen. If you're here because you want to support someone who's grieving, welcome, they really need you. And I also hope to reduce some of the stigma around substance use related deaths.

With a bonus cancer diagnosis and treatment thrown in the mix to keep me on my toes – as if I didn't already know how precious life is – I persist. Thriving? Not quite. But despite having fear and anxiety as my constant companions, I remain cautiously optimistic enough to buy tea bags in bulk and endeavour to have a meaningful life.

Miranda writes thoughtfully about the dark side of “bright-siding” and the importance of letting anger and sadness be. She shares some things that have helped her, like tending the rare orchid Mike bought her, and indulging in the occasional ugly cry among some non-judgemental trees and rocks. She also explores questions about what happens after death, taking comfort in the principle of physics that says a person's energy can never be destroyed. Miranda introduced me to this magnificent quote from writer Aaron Freedman:

You want a physicist to speak at your funeral. You want the physicist to talk to your grieving family about the conservation of energy, so they will understand that your energy has not died. You want the physicist to step down from the pulpit and walk to your brokenhearted spouse there in the pew and tell him that all the photons that ever bounced off your face, all the particles whose paths were interrupted by your smile, by the touch of your hair, hundreds of trillions of particles, have raced off like children, their ways forever changed by you. And as your widow rocks in the arms of a loving family, may the physicist let her know that all the photons that bounced from you were gathered in the particle detectors that are her eyes, that those photons created within her constellations of electromagnetically charged neurons whose energy will go on forever.

Benjamin Stevenson

Vancouver, BC

January 1987 - March 2022

This story is based on interviews with Ben's twin sister Sarah and my son-in-law, Graeme. Ben died exactly two years after my daughter Sophie. My daughter Emma was unable to accompany Graeme to the funeral in Vancouver because she was too far along in her pregnancy with twins. My twin granddaughters were given the middle names Sophie and Benjamin.

Ben and his twin sister Sarah were raised in the affluent Dunbar neighbourhood of Vancouver. Their parents grew up in Trail, BC and got together when they were quite young. Their mum was one of ten kids in a proud Italian family, while their dad was an only child. As a result, their mum wanted fewer kids, so she could have a close relationship with each one, and their dad wanted more than one so they'd have a playmate. Their first child was born with a heart defect and died at seven months. The couple needed time to grieve, and then had some difficulty with fertility. When the twins came along, the entire extended family was thrilled.

The babies almost had different birthdays, as Sarah arrived shortly before midnight, eyes open and eager to greet the world. Ben had to be coaxed. Family lore includes the story of their conception - their parents were travelling that particularly month and diligently engaging in baby-making whether on a nice plush bed or a mat on someone's floor. Their efforts paid off.

Both twins were high achievers, excelling in school, sports and music. Sarah describes their childhood in glowing terms. The two of them got along well and had close friends and a rich connection to their mum's huge family. They spent time at an off-grid cabin where they had lots of freedom to roam. At the same time, there were high expectations placed on them, but Sarah says they thrived in this environment. Their parents were very loving, both with their kids and with each other.

Ben's friend Graeme remembers meeting him in grade one and being thrilled that this fun, athletic kid also had a deeply nerdy side and would happily spend hours playing Lego with him. In grade three, Ben moved on to a gifted class, but they stayed friends, bonding over Star Wars and video games, and were reunited in grade nine. Graeme says,

In high school, mystery of mysteries, he continued to hang out with me and my other unpopular friends. He was the best player on a very bad rugby team. He was an excellent soccer player. He downhill skied. He never sought the limelight but begrudgingly played piano and sang in our band, and joined the theatre club with us to take part in an awful production of *The Crucible*. We all had long hair but he was the only one who could pull it off.

Ben, Graeme and their crew had marvelous adventures riding around on their bikes with detours to the McDonald's drive-thru, eating Sour Patch Kids at the movies until their mouths were raw, and learning to sail - or more often flip - tiny boats at Jericho Beach.

Ben and Sarah went through a huge upheaval when they were ten. Their mother got cancer and died two years later. After her diagnosis, she devoted the time she had to supporting her children. Sarah had matured quite early, and was able to fully engage in those final months of mother-daughter talks, and even to start the grieving process with her mum to guide her. Ben wasn't quite in the same emotional place, and was slower to process what happened. Both kids remained high functioning, and watched their father take care of all the pragmatic responsibilities of family life. But the effects of their loss naturally lingered.

Their dad John moved on soon afterwards, remarrying after six months. It was too soon for the twins, and their grief was compounded when, three years later, the family home was torn down to build a bigger one that would accommodate their merged family, including two step-children, a few years younger than the twins. He sold the beloved family cabin to help finance this undertaking. He was trying to do right by everyone, and create an investment for the children's future, but Ben and Sarah felt upended, further removed from the memories and places that anchored them.

Ben went to UBC with members of his childhood cohort. Graeme told this story at his funeral:

In our second year of university, Ben took the first semester off to take up smoking, skateboarding, and working at American Apparel. He was really cool. That year he got very excited for Halloween, and he worked on his costume for weeks.

Because Ben took up skateboarding, I tried to as well. I was not good. So I hop on my skateboard with a beer bottle in hand, only to make it about a half-block before I fly off and manage to fall onto the beer bottle, shattering it with my arm. I show up and someone's dad opens the door. "I need help," I say, bleeding all over the porch. All he says is, "Have you been drinking?"

But then Ben appears, in the most amazing Wolverine costume you can possibly imagine. Completely homemade with pieces cribbed from the backroom of the American Apparel on Granville. Ben takes charge. There is no question of missing the party. Dressed as Wolverine, he takes me in my bloodied spotted owl costume to Shoppers Drug Mart, and grabs first aid supplies. We get to the party and he bandages me up in the bathroom. And then we have a great evening.

The next morning, I go to the hospital. The doctor who finally sees me says, "It's too late for stitches, you'll have these scars for life. But whoever bandaged these wounds did a hell of a job." I'm so thankful for these scars.

Ben got into cannabis as a young teen. Towards the end of his undergrad degree, everything came to a head. He had a painful break-up and went travelling, but was clearly not himself. He seemed to have lost his footing. Sarah went through a shake-up in her twenties as well - albeit a healthier one - rejecting some of the pressures and priorities she'd grown up with and taking time to explore alternative ways of living before landing on a new career in Haida Gwaii.

Ben found his way back to university, starting a Master's and doing meaningful work in health, including AIDS research, but he couldn't quite find a comfortable fit anywhere. Being the smartest one in most rooms, he didn't always take kindly to being supervised. One of his friends coined the term "Bensplaining" to describe his tendency to interject with more complete or correct information during conversations.

Ben loved being around people and partied hard. He pushed boundaries and was up for anything. Frequent visits to the emergency room ensued. His roommate raised the alarm about Ben's cocaine use, and the family intervened to help, but his drug dependence ultimately became more dangerous. He started using intravenously and turned to fentanyl. Ben's behaviour could be erratic and manic, but it was hard to know whether the underlying cause was addiction or mental illness.

For more than ten years, Ben lived in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. He built meaningful connections, working as a peer researcher for the Ribbon Community (formerly AIDS Vancouver) and organizations involved in harm reduction. A video called *What's in My Drugs*, produced by the BC Centre on Substance Use is dedicated "In loving memory of Ben Stevenson."

He always welcomed communication with his family and friends, though they often had to go look for him on the streets. There were get-togethers for birthdays and holidays. John and Catherine, Ben's step-mom, checked up on him regularly, bringing care packages and going for coffee dates, playing frisbee golf, or strolling the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood with him. It was harder for some family members than others to accept Ben's situation. Like many parents, John held onto the hope that he would get better and fulfil the hopes he'd always had for his son.

Graeme left Vancouver after his undergrad degree but returned in 2015 and was glad to be near Ben again. They saw each other often, even when Ben's deteriorating health made things rocky. Reflecting on who Ben was and what he meant to his longtime friends, Graeme says,

He had the kindest, gentlest, most beautiful soul. He had this incredible magnetism - a combination of joie de vivre and sweet tenderness. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about him was that even when he was hurting so badly, he was always driven by his desire to help others. He was a brother to me, and I loved him very much.

Sarah worked hard to understand Ben's world and accept the reality of her brother's life, but was also acutely aware that there is often only one exit from fentanyl. As had been the case with her mother, Sarah had some capacity to grieve in advance of Ben's death. After Ben died, she shed the relationships and patterns that didn't serve her, as so many of us do after a traumatic loss. There can be a kind of bitter beauty in that process, and even a sense of gratitude towards the person whose absence quite starkly clarifies what matters most.

Devin Ramdoyal

Jan 1999 - Feb 2021

Winnipeg, MB

This is part one of a story of two young men in different parts of the country, each one his mother's only child and deeply loved. They were born a year apart and died a year apart, both at the age of twenty-two, barely adults.

Devin was very much a wanted baby. His mother Sandra had difficulty conceiving and was given a short window to make it happen after undergoing surgery for endometriosis. Happily, everything went according to plan. Caring for a newborn during a Winnipeg winter can be quite isolating, but Sandra would bundle up the baby and venture out. She and her husband had their parents nearby to help.

Sandra was back in Winnipeg after pursuing a PhD in Toronto, working as a sessional instructor while building her academic career. Her work was challenging and satisfying. Life was good when Devin was young. He was a quiet, sweet and easygoing kid. He enjoyed martial arts and stayed with it for several years. He deeply loved the family cats. When he was ten, his parents got him his own cat, Oliver, who was with him for the rest of his life. He relished time at Lake Winnipeg, and hours jumping on his backyard trampoline... the simple joys of childhood.

School was never a comfortable place for Devin. He didn't get into any trouble, but he couldn't wait to come straight home at the end of the day. As early as age nine, Devin was using the word "depression" to describe what he felt. He was assessed in grade four by several professionals who identified anxiety as an issue, but were unable to shed much more light on the situation or offer concrete advice. Devin would much later be diagnosed with ADD and a serious mood disorder.

Towards the end of grade nine, Devin was becoming more isolated, holing up alone to play the video games he enjoyed to excess, and becoming more fearful of stepping out into the world. In grade ten, he asked to move into auto mechanics in a vocational program, not because he had a keen interest in cars, but because he wanted to leave the daily grind of regular school. Much of this only became clear in retrospect, as Devin was very private.

Devin managed to graduate high school, a remarkable achievement. He was motivated to complete the requisite volunteer component at St. Amant, a residential program for developmentally disabled adults. He loved it there, ultimately putting in five hundred volunteer hours. His care and kindness had a huge impact on the residents, staff and other volunteers.

In his late teens, Devin experienced a major depression. By eighteen, there were psychotic episodes; it was hard to know what was organic and what might be drug-related, as he was self-medicating by this time with illegal substances. It was all impossibly confusing, but several signs pointed to schizophrenia. Devin entered an early psychosis prevention and intervention program which involved intensive treatment and medication. Sandra's lifeline during that time was a nurse named Todd, who talked her through it as often as she needed.

The situation at home became untenable. Eventually, to protect their own mental health and marriage, Devin's parents had to insist that he move out. They were able to pay for a nice apartment, so he wouldn't have to live in the kind of unhealthy or unpleasant rentals his social assistance would cover.

Having not heard from him for a while, his worried parents went to check on him one winter day when Devin had just turned twenty-two. Their worst fear was realized. He was dead from a lethal combination of cocaine and opioids.

When Sandra contacted St. Amant to tell them the news, there was such an outpouring of emotion and support that the family ended up working with the program to create an outdoor sanctuary in Devin's memory. The St. Amant Reflection and Connection Space has become a place of solace for Sandra too.

Sandra is active in advocacy and education. She does public speaking about her son, working to dispel myths about mental illness, substance use, and the relationship between the two. In an article for CBC Winnipeg, she wrote in 2023:

“Devin suffered from two potentially fatal diseases: schizophrenia and addiction. Both of these robbed him of the ability to live out his life. And while you may recognize schizophrenia as a disease, I suspect there are many out there who question whether addiction deserves that label. Until this tragic outcome, I was one of them, having had no prior exposure to it and a lot of bias. I thought it was a choice. Now I know better and see addiction for what it is: a chemical, brain-based compulsive disease. My son did not choose the path to addiction any more than he chose to become mentally ill.”

Alex Guthrie

Saint John, NB

March 2000 - June 2022

This is the second part of a story about two young men in different parts of the country, each one his mother's only child and deeply loved. They were born a year apart and died a year apart, both at the age of twenty-two, barely adults.

Their stories raise the same fundamental questions. What if, as very ill young boys, they had been treated with the same urgency and compassion as a kid with, say, leukemia or cystic fibrosis? What if every healthcare provider they encountered had all the latest rigorously researched scientific knowledge about mental illness and addiction? What if this information was politically neutral?

Life expectancy in Canada is actually dropping as a result of drug-related deaths, which are so often linked to mental illness. As we try and fail to stop the carnage, it seems a bit like we're bringing a knife to a gunfight. In the future, people will be shocked to learn that so many died because they didn't get the care they needed - many because it wasn't available or they or couldn't afford it, some because the right treatment doesn't exist yet. History will look upon this as a dark time.

Alex was born when his mother Melissa was seventeen. Her relationship with his father didn't last, but both sets of grandparents were involved in his upbringing. They were known as Nanny

and Grampy Down the Street and Nanny and Grampy Farm. Alex got to experience both an urban and a rural childhood.

Alex was a happy, healthy baby. He never really “misbehaved.” Adults would always remark that he was very polite. He was inquisitive about everything. At his grandparents’ farm, he cared for the chickens and barn cats and grew vegetables. Alex took part in all kinds of afterschool sports programs; his favourite was basketball. He had one very close childhood friend who was at their house much of the time, almost like a sibling.

Melissa pursued higher education despite the challenges of being a young single mum, completing a university degree and succeeding first in the corporate sector and then in government. When Alex was seven, he gained a step-dad. They spent many happy hours off-road cycling and snowboarding together. The family was eventually able to buy a home and a cottage, where Alex loved swimming and boating.

They travelled often, camping in the Atlantic provinces and New England. Theme parks were a favourite destination. Alex was a thrill-seeker who loved wild rides and zip-lining. To him, mundane activities were scary while scary activities were a source of delight.

Things started to go wrong in grade five. Alex was sick with scarlet fever and started school a week after his classmates, which made him particularly anxious. Because he had a healthier home life than many of his peers, it was easy for him to escape his teachers’ attention and fall through the cracks. As middle school progressed, his teachers described him as stubborn, but the issue was a learning disability, exacerbated by anxiety. Once he’d had an assessment, Alex was reluctant to accept supports that would further single him out as different. He struggled with the misperception that he was stupid. Melissa deeply understood his dread of school, having experienced the same thing herself, but tried hard to encourage his education, turning to homeschooling as an alternative.

As he grew older, Alex began drinking and his behaviour became unpredictable. He had a lot of anger about his absent father, whose own addiction issues meant a relationship wasn’t possible.

Alex’s anxiety could be crippling, making it difficult for him to leave the house. At home, he found joy in music, creating beats and free styling. He streamed record numbers of songs by Canadian artists. His absolute favourite was Nova Scotia rapper Classified, whose lyrics resonated with him. He also found comfort in his little dog, Diesel.

Alex sought treatment and was hospitalized for his acute anxiety, but while some doctors are quick to prescribe benzodiazepines, none of his would consider this option due to the risk of addiction. Alex felt compelled to source his own, desperate for relief. His unsupervised drug use led to a seizure disorder, and he experienced psychotic episodes. It was hard to know which symptoms were *cause* and which were *effect*. When he couldn't get the drugs he depended on, Alex turned to even less safe alternatives. More than one doctor expressed shock at the quantity and quality of the substances he frankly admitted to taking, but still no one would help him with proper supervised medication. When his foot was crushed in a car accident, he was denied pain relief at the hospital, stigmatized as being drug-seeking. It was suggested he had arranged to be run over.

By the time Alex was eighteen, the situation at home was not safe or sustainable, so Alex moved in with his girlfriend. They were together from the time he was seventeen until his death six years later. Melissa checked in on him every day. She and his girlfriend Amy did everything they could to keep him alive.

Alex developed a very serious lung infection which turned into lobar pneumonia. His fear of hospitals and history of mistreatment at the hands of medical professionals meant that the infection spread unchecked and ultimately led to organ failure. Alex seemed to know and accept that he was going to die, but his decline was sudden. Covid protocols were in place when he was rushed to hospital, where everything was chaotic and communication confusing. Melissa was with him when he died, but his step-dad and grandparents weren't able to get through the Covid screening procedures in time.

A spiral of ignorance, negligence and stigma contributed to Alex's death. Melissa feels it would be futile to demand accountability or seek justice for her son, but often speaks publicly about him. In the small community of Saint John, her story has reached the ears of politicians and decision-makers, as well as friends, neighbours and strangers who have all been impacted by addiction.

She keeps a purple chair on her porch - a symbol of remembrance for those lost to drug-related deaths. People have left her gifts and notes, sharing glimpses into their own grief. In the publication "Gone Too Soon," by Moms Stop the Harm, Melissa wrote, "Alex was so much more than his mental illness and addiction. All he wanted was to live with dignity." As do we all.

Jordan Miller
Pender Island, BC

August 1986 - February 2014

Leslie McBain imagined writing poetry and dandling a grandbaby on her knee in her quiet refuge on Pender Island. Instead, she has spent the last decade as a fierce activist. Two years after the death of her son Jordan in 2014, she and two other bereaved mothers founded Moms Stop the Harm (MSTH), a national nonprofit that supports grieving families and advocates for solutions to the catastrophic toxic drug crisis that is claiming so many young lives. Since then, membership in MSTH has exploded. To paraphrase Groucho Marx, nobody wants to belong to this club that will accept them as a member.

Leslie still looks like the hippie she used to be, a little peace sign around her neck. But people listen when this unassuming, unguarded gray-haired woman hits them with her truth bombs.

Dead people don't recover.
Prohibition is an abject failure.
Nice people use drugs.

With much practice, Leslie has become mistress of the sound bite. She is unafraid in front of a microphone or even a Prime Minister. It's something that happens when you have nothing to lose.

Leslie's path to motherhood was not an easy one. But the moment Jordan was born, she looked into his eyes and thought, "I know you." Leslie had just delivered her son, who was in too much of a hurry to wait for the midwives to arrive. Her dear friend Kim had offered to be a surrogate to Leslie and her husband, after their years of agonizing miscarriages and unsuccessful IVF treatments. And now, they had the baby they had longed for.

Jordan was an infant who barely slept, which foreshadowed the constant movement and energy that would characterize his entire childhood. Fortunately for his frazzled parents, he was rarely cranky.

When Jordan was five, the family settled on Pender Island off the coast of BC after many adventurous years of travel in a Volkswagen van and a stint running a plumbing business in California. Leslie and Carl bought a large oceanfront acreage with a musty little wood cabin, which they transformed into a beautiful sanctuary. There was no plumber on the island, so Carl had plenty of work. Leslie began running writing workshops, and open mic poetry nights.

Jordan's ADHD was diagnosed in grade four. He was doing okay in school, thriving socially but unable to sit still. He was a good-natured prankster whose charm helped him get away with a lot. Nobody could stay mad at him. His favourite place was on a skateboard and his adventurous nature made him an intrepid young traveller on long trips with his parents. Underneath his thrill-seeking behaviour, he was a gentle and deeply caring kid.

In high school, Jordan found himself among the hard-partying skater crowd. He used alcohol and drugs recreationally, as youth are wont to do. In retrospect, Leslie understands that he was treating his ADHD, seeking a bit of calm for his agitated mind. Jordan would often sit in the shower, letting the hot water cascade soothingly onto his head until it ran cold.

Leslie could see that his drug use was becoming problematic, but didn't know what to do, apart from keeping their line of communication wide open. When Jordan recognized that he was in trouble, he sought addiction treatment. It was expensive, poorly run and didn't stick.

Jordan had been prescribed oxycodone after an injury, and became dependent on the pills, which has been proven in court to be exactly what its manufacturers intended. Leslie accompanied him to his doctor's office, where they explained that, after many refills, Jordan had an opioid addiction. The doctor lashed out at Jordan for misleading him about his pain level, and fired him as a patient (this person paid for his actions when Leslie complained to the College of Physicians and Surgeons). Jordan easily got prescriptions from walk-in clinics instead (two of the five he frequented also later faced sanctions). He also turned to an illegal supply.

Despite his drug use, Jordan was growing into a successful entrepreneur. He had a business called Island Sweeps, providing chimney sweeping and wood stove installation to Gulf Islands residents. He was reliable and always affable with his customers.

One day when he was twenty-five, Jordan's heart stopped. The coroner's report found no one drug in a lethal concentration, but a toxic combination of many different substances.

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