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The Connection Between Character and Substance Use Disorders

“Your life can be a sob story or a success story—this choice is yours.”

This was the advice I received from my brother's addiction counselor on the day my father died of a heroin overdose when I was 16. I watched my father struggle for the better part of 10 years—in and out of treatment centers, sick and tired of being sick and tired—but he loved me wholly, and I knew that. Despite knowing I was his truest pride and joy, I could not help but feel angry, hurt, and broken by his continued use of the drugs that would ultimately cost him his life.

I always dreamed of going to medical school and becoming a trauma surgeon, but on Aug. 31, 2018, the day I stood in the front row of my father's funeral, I knew I would chase an entirely different dream. This dream was fueled by loss, grief, and a desire to make sure no other child would feel what I felt on the day I found out my father died. I became a part of the 321,566 children who had lost a parent to an overdose between 2011 and 2021¹. An overdose is a preventable death, meaning that more than 300,000 children should never have to experience this insurmountable loss. I made a promise to myself and my father that I would do my part in changing the statistics for the better.

There is a common misconception that people with a substance use disorder are weak, unworthy, and have made a choice to become addicted to a devastating drug. I can guarantee that no one wakes up in the morning and thinks, “Today's a good day to become addicted to heroin.” I was a front-row witness to the shame, guilt, embarrassment, and entrapment that addiction brings, and I knew I had the power to change lives knowing this. My father believed I would do incredible things; he told me ever since I was little that I was brilliant and a force to be reckoned with. I also knew I had two choices: sink or swim—be a sob story or a success story. I chose the latter.

This loss, coupled with the understanding of the significance of substance use disorders, could have been crippling. It instead was a catalyst for a profound determination to break

cycles of addiction, to grab the hands of those suffering and pull them out of the flames, to meet people where they are in life and bring compassion with a lack of judgment.

I have worked in substance use disorder treatment for two years. I have encountered all walks of life and have been a safe haven for those who can't find the light at the end of the tunnel. This year, I began an undergraduate research project examining the psychological effects of parental substance use disorders on children. But most of all, I am still the girl who stood in the front row of her dad's funeral ten days after her 16th birthday. I am still the girl on a mission to save the lives of those suffering. I am still the girl who made a promise to a cause much, much bigger than herself.

It is difficult to navigate loss; it is conflicting to choose a path where you know you will encounter the same factors that upturned your entire existence, but it is far more difficult to walk through life knowing you could have made a difference and chose not to.