

My Son's Killer



Andy Zorn's mission was to make friends and families laugh. He was the class clown. He made parties come alive. As he grew older, he helped friends through tough times. He served with the Army's 82nd Airborne Division in Iraq.

His bright future, however, masked a dark secret.

Marijuana abuse took him down a spiral of calls to suicide help lines, hospitalizations in five mental health hospitals and two stints of court-ordered mental health treatment. He told his mother, father and social worker he had to quit using marijuana if he was to live, but he just couldn't do it.

And then, at the age of 31, my son hanged himself from a tree in Peoria, Ariz.

His suicide note explained the cause of his death. "I want to die. My soul is already dead. Marijuana killed my soul + ruined my brain."

As I came to terms with Andy's death and the note he left, I was confused. I'd always believed marijuana wasn't addictive. My research since has revealed I was far from the truth. Marijuana is highly addictive. Almost one in three users of marijuana exhibit symptoms of substance use disorder. I learned later that my son had been diagnosed with severe cannabis use disorder.

Andy's wallet contained his medical marijuana card and a dispensary loyalty card indicating his numerous purchases and progress toward earning a free eighth of an ounce. So I visited the manager at the store he frequented.

I wanted her to know my son's story so she could prevent another death by recognizing someone in trouble with addiction. I asked her to watch for any healthy young person buying the limit of 2½ ounces every 14 days, which could be a sign of dependence.

She told me marijuana is not addictive. "Marijuana has never been related to a death," she insisted.

I asked her to look at my son's suicide note. I asked her to look at his death certificate, one no parent wants to see listing suicide as the cause of death. I offered her copies to share with her "patients" to help prevent another death.

She declined and asked me if there was another explanation for my son's death, another drug in the coroner's report. No, there were no other drugs.

She pointed out the decor in the dispensary: giant copies of checks to local non-profits, including a children's hospital. I suggested she consider donating to organizations that educate youth to prevent



drug and alcohol use at the early ages susceptible to substance use disorders. She said that was an interesting idea.

I took note of other décor in the dispensary. A sign in the receptionist's window promoted products with 90 percent THC, the psychoactive element of pot. In the 1970s, THC content was in the low single digits.

Then I left because I know a business is unlikely to help prevent use of its product by people who will be its best customers in the future. I left because I am sickened by an industry that refuses to acknowledge the known risks of its product. I left because this woman made it clear she will continue to sell her product without feeling responsible for customers exhibiting signs of abuse.

I left because my desire to save a life like my son's is wasted on anyone in this industry. Marijuana is much like the tobacco industry of the past, which refused to acknowledge known risks in its product.



I left because I recognize my target audience now – and it is *us*. Polls say 50 percent of voters support fully legalizing marijuana. Yet only 10 percent or so use the product. Clearly many of us do not know the facts about this drug.

I left to continue taking my son's message to as many people as I can find, those who will care and those who need to be educated about today's potent marijuana.

I left to spend my time with those who care about protecting youth and helping them reach happy, healthy, productive adulthood – something that marijuana stole from Andy.

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