

Heroin Hits Home

Student Turns Family Tragedy into Prevention and Rescue Mission

As executive director and co-founder of Live4Lali, Inc, a nonprofit organization dedicated to education and resources about drug addiction and mental illness, Chelsea Laliberte spends her days fighting the war on drugs in America. And as a student enrolled in the online MSSA program, she's gaining the clinical background that will help her better field inquiries and provide assistance to families torn apart by drug abuse and mental disorders.

Laliberte, a Chicago-area native, knows firsthand this horror. She lost her younger brother, Alex, to a heroin overdose in 2008.

"Six years ago, nobody was really talking about heroin or the drug addiction and overdose epidemic because it was stigmatized," she said.

Around the time of her brother's death, Laliberte was finishing a work-and-live program in London. She came home and knew something was not right with her brother, but she and her family members struggled to determine what was wrong.

"We didn't know he was using heroin until the day he died. It doesn't just affect him; it affects everyone who knows him. What you don't know can kill," she said.

A passion for change and a desire to help others experiencing the throes of addiction drove Laliberte and her parents to start Live4Lali in January 2009, only a month after Alex's death.

"There was literally nothing out there. There was no general awareness campaign for addiction. There wasn't even a centralized point for education for the public, doctors, educators or anything," she said. "We were, and still are, in a very broken system of criminalizing these people. Over a five-year period there has been a significant shift in that viewpoint. People are really starting to grasp the seriousness of this disease."

While heroin is ultimately what caused Alex's death, his using began as a result of other drug use—a common cycle, according to Laliberte.



Photo provided by Chelsea Laliberte

Online MSSA student Chelsea Laliberte is the executive director and co-founder of Live4Lali, Inc., where she is fighting the war on drugs through a number of initiatives, including educating the public, law enforcement officers and others on the use of Naloxone, a life-saving antidote used to counter the effects of opioid overdose.

"Prescription pills are shelled out so irresponsibly in this country," Laliberte said, adding that many people begin taking opioid painkillers and become addicted. Before they know it, they are seeking out other ways to satisfy their cravings. Heroin is readily available and cheap. Drug dealers have successfully targeted the suburbs. And as Laliberte has found through her research, more often than not, victims are 18- to 25-year-old white males.

The impact of drug use extends well beyond the victims and their loved ones, Laliberte said. Using has an economic impact, costing taxpayers billions of dollars every year.

"It's going to take a very, very long time to fix the problem. Every system that exists in the country is affected by this," Laliberte said.

Laliberte's work at Live4Lali tackles the epidemic in several ways.

"The most immediate need is preventing death," Laliberte said, adding that the organization's efforts to educate the public, law enforcement officers and others on the use of Naloxone, a life-saving antidote, tie into this initiative.

Live4Lali also works to re-educate the public on why people use drugs,

as well as supporting treatment research, court and support services, grief support groups and other entities that aid victims of the heroin epidemic.

The Lake Zurich, Illinois-based nonprofit primarily serves the Chicagoland area, but Laliberte often fields inquiries from across the country. In 2015, Live4Lali is focusing on getting two initiatives off the ground. One is the opening of an education and resource center in the Chicago area. Second is a national awareness campaign that will feature public speeches and awareness events.

Laliberte believes the online MSSA program will help her achieve these goals, and more. She chose the online program because of the flexibility it provided to fit with her busy schedule. Laliberte is studying part-time and expects to graduate in 2016. Upon completion, she hopes to clinically counsel individuals struggling with mental health and drug addiction.

"When anybody calls, no matter what they need, I now have the skills and ability to point them in the right direction," she said.

For more information about Live4Lali, visit Live4lali.org or call 1.844.LV4.LALI.