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'It Could Be Your Kid' St. Pete Start-Up Battles Fentanyl Overdoses

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"It Could Be Your Kid" — Fentanyl is a potent synthetic opioid linked to most deadly drug overdoes in the U.S., including Florida. This St. Pete start-up battles fentanyl overdoses.
Wikimedia Commons, DEA

Carolyn Bradfield's daughter Laura suffered a fatal drug overdose in 2017, just a few days before Christmas.

She was 29 years old.

"She didn't make her 30th birthday," Bradfield said, noting her daughter's challenges with substances and visits to rehab centers in hopes of some improvements.

Now, Bradfield, who lives in St. Petersburg, hopes to bring technology to combat rising numbers of fatal overdoses in Florida and across the nation.

InterAct LifeLine: Tragic Beginnings

Bradfield and Bruce Ahern are spearheading InterAct LifeLine LLC and its sister company Convey Holdings Inc. The startup effort focuses on bringing digital services and assistance to rehabilitation patients *after* they leave treatment centers. The pair are rolling out a smart-watch app, Lifeline Connect,. The app aims to help loved ones keep track of those struggling with dangerous substances. The companies have operations in St. Pete and the Atlanta area.

Bradfield knows the business and personal sides of the venture. She and Ahern have senior- and principal-level experience with teleconferencing, telemedicine, and other digital and technology platforms.

She said her daughter Laura struggled with drugs and addiction for 15 years. The struggles started when she was 14 and included multiple visits to rehabilitation centers.

Laura overdosed in late December 2017. Bradfield said she died in an Atlanta area hospital four days before Christmas.

"It Could Be Your Kid"

Bradfield said her daughter probably would have died earlier in the current substance landscape.

Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid frequently manufactured in China and smuggled into the U.S. from Mexico, is 50 times more powerful than heroin and 100 times more potent than morphine.

It's also more deadly.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control projects 109,940 fatal drug overdoses between February 2022 and February 2023. (The most recent data available.) More than 8,000 of those deaths happened in Florida, with most of the fatal overdoses tied to fentanyl.

Deadly drug overdoses increased from less than 20,000 fatalities annually in 1999 and 2000 to the current levels of more than 105,000 deaths each year.

The dangerous opioid is cheap to make, easy to transport, and used in fake pain pills and other medications. Increasingly, it's mixed with illegal narcotics.

In many ways, fentanyl has created instances of Russian roulette with users — from the experienced to first timers — not knowing what's mixed in with their drugs.

That's increased the number of dreaded telephone calls and knocks on the door around Florida and other states.

"It could be your kid," Bradfield said, noting the dangers to first-time or neophyte users who might get the wrong pill from the wrong person at the wrong party or event. "It's not just the addicted."

Help After Rehab

Her main impetus is to use technology to make rehabilitation efforts more effective after patients check out of centers.

Bradfield said there are frequent trends of those struggling with addiction going back to those behaviors in the weeks and months after visits to often-expensive inpatient centers.

"People didn't stay connected to the rehab. They didn't have enough structure and accountability," Bradfield said in an interview with *The Gabber Newspaper*.

She and Ahern want to work with treatment centers, behavioral health groups, and educational partners to help extend those connections and offer digital resources aimed at the root of addictions and relapses.

"We are going to take our technology and we are going to use it offer digital treatment (services), extensive amounts of education, support groups, and other groups that will help you if you are struggling with other things [like] depression, PTSD, anxiety," she said.

Levels of anxiety, depression and other mental and behavioral health challenges are up, according to Mental Health America and its 2023 annual surveys.

Fifteen percent of Americans had substance abuse problems in the last 12 months, according to the group, with 93.5% not receiving any treatment.

Fifty million Americans are facing mental health challenges with another 12.1 million saying they seriously considered suicide, according to MHA.

Carolyn Bradfield (right) and her late daughter, Laura.

Digital Safety Net

The St. Petersburg pair are rolling out an app for parents and other loved ones that link to their kid's smartwatch or FitBit. The app connects those watches by tracking movements and vital signs.

If someone goes silent on the app or shows signs of distress, the concerned parent or family member can then try to contact them or their social circle or can call 911.

"It just gives you a safety net around the kid," Ahern said.

Bradfield said Laura was found overdosing at a RaceTrac gas station in Atlanta.

"We got a knock on the door at 4:30 in the morning," she said, noting that if responses to the overdose had been faster Laura might have had a great chance of surviving.

She said a number of fatal overdoses — during and after the pandemic — happen when people are alone and struggling with other mental and behavioral health issues.

"A lot of these people are overdosing alone at home," she said.

Ahern said the target price on the app is $19.99 per month. That price will cover two people and their smartwatches.

The company is also crowdsourcing via GoFundMe and has a nonprofit arm aimed at helping lower-income households with costs.

Access to care and high costs of inpatient and other treatment services is a major behavioral health issue, she said.

"Laura was in 10, 15 programs. We spent a lot of money on rehab and none of it worked," Bradfield said.

The pair hopes to gain more momentum via word of mouth and proselytizing from families and kids who gain from the digital treatment offerings as well as the smartwatch app, which they hope saves lives.

"I want one parent in every high school as an evangelist," he said.

That will help spread the word and prove proof of concept in a behavioral health and treatment space looking for plenty of answers.

by Mike Sunnucks