



"We support legalisation and regulation of drugs because we have experienced the pain and loss caused by drug war, and don't want others to suffer what we have."

The 'war on drugs' is justified to us on the grounds that it protects our children and young people. Its supporters claim that people who use and supply drugs must be arrested, criminalised, and in some cases even imprisoned, to keep drugs off the streets and our youth safe. But treating drugs as a criminal problem, rather than a health issue, has been tried for more than half a century. And the evidence from around the world is clear: harsh drug laws not only fail to deter young people from taking drugs, they actively put them in danger, with devastating results for them and their families.

Anyone's Child: Families for Safer Drug Control is bringing together families whose loved ones have been harmed by our current approach to drugs, so we can tell our stories, and explain why the legal regulation of drugs would keep everyone's children safer. But there is nothing exceptional about us. Our children, brothers, sisters or partners who have been stigmatised, criminalised, denied medical care or even killed by drug prohibition could be **Anyone's Child**. As Mick and Hope Humphreys put it, "What happened to us could happen to you."

That is why we are calling for the UK government to commission an independent review of our approach to drugs that compares it with all the alternatives, including decriminalisation and legal regulation. We are confident that would show treating drugs as a health not a criminal justice issue, and in particular, legally regulating them, would help to protect all of our children. This briefing includes just five families' stories out of the many thousands harmed by the drug war. For more, including videos, visit www.anyoneschild.org

1. Anne-Marie: My only child might still be alive if ecstasy was regulated

Watch Anne-Marie's video at www.anyoneschild.org



On 20th July, 2013, I received the phone call that no parent wants to get. The voice said that my 15-year-old daughter was gravely ill and they were trying to save her life. On that beautiful, sunny Saturday morning, Martha had swallowed half a gram of MDMA powder (more widely known as ecstasy) that turned out to be 91% pure. Within two hours of taking it, my daughter died of an accidental ecstasy overdose. She was my only child.

I was blissfully ignorant about the world of drugs before Martha died. Drugs are laughed about on sitcoms, joked about on panel shows. Much as I hate to admit it, they are a normal part of modern society. Young people witness their friends not dying from taking drugs all the time. So by simply spouting the "just don't do it" line and hoping that will be enough of a deterrent, we're closing our eyes to what's really going on.

The subject of drugs evokes so much emotion in people, it's hard for many to imagine what moving away from prohibition would actually look like in practice. Many think it would result in a free-for-all, but that's what we actually have at the moment. Drugs are currently 100% controlled by criminals, who are willing to sell to you whether you're aged 5 or 55. Everyone has easy-access to dangerous drugs, that is a fact.

After Martha died, I looked at her internet history and found that she had been researching ways to take drugs safely – I've said that; "Martha wanted to get high, she didn't want to die". All parents would prefer one of those options to the other. And while no one wants drugs being sold to children, if Martha had got hold of legally regulated drugs meant for adults, labelled with health warnings and dosage instructions, she would not have gone on to take 5-10 times the safe dose.

When I hear the news that a young person has died and yet another family has joined the bereaved parents' club, I feel helpless as I wonder how many more need to die before someone in government will actually do something about it? As I stand by my child's grave, what more evidence do I need that things must change? Isn't this loss of precious lives an indicator of a law that is past its sell-by date and in need of urgent reform? A good start would be to conduct the very first proper review of our drug laws in over 40 years and to consider alternative approaches. But the people in power turn away from it. They play an amazing game of 'let's pretend', well there's no way for me to hide - every day I wake up, the stark reality of Martha's absence hits me once again.

As I write this, I have been without my girl for 643 days, it sounds like a lot doesn't it? But in the aftermath, time becomes distorted and meaningless. So to represent my beloved Martha, it is my quest to align myself with those who can help progress this conversation. That is why I'm involved with the Anyone's Child project. This unique chorus of voices cannot be ignored, there is nowhere to hide from our harrowing stories – but with every step this project takes in pursuit of political change, one more set of footprints on this earth will hopefully be saved from being extinguished.

2. Rose and Jeremy: We lost two sons to heroin because of the drug war



We live in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire. The youngest of our three children, Roland, died aged 23, in 2003. My middle son and stepson to Jeremy, Jacob (Jake), died aged 37, in 2014. Both from drug overdoses. Having 'Just say no' conversations about drugs when they were young teenagers hadn't worked. These intelligent boys wrecked their school careers and continued on downward paths, eventually becoming heroin addicts. The idea of what the drugs laws might do to them didn't stop them.

Only someone who has lived with addicts can understand how hard it was for 15 years, with anxiety our constant companion, the roller-coasters of hope and disappointment, and the shame that made us keep it all to ourselves. But we loved our sons. Despite the addiction, we would see glimpses of Roland's gentleness, and Jake's vulnerability, and the ridiculous sense of humour they shared. We hoped that someday they would be in control of their drug use.

Roland had occasional unskilled jobs. He stayed a lot at his girlfriend's flat but was often home too, and he would sometimes confide in us about the drugs. He stopped using heroin and stayed off it for a few months when he was 22. Sadly he turned to heroin again for comfort after an upset with his girlfriend. The next year, while he was on the waiting list for a methadone programme, Roland was found dead at a friend's house.

Jake, in spite of having been expelled from school, had gone to university in his early twenties. But he hadn't managed to get off drugs completely and he worked in short-lived unskilled jobs. Then he chose to make his third attempt at rehab; this time it worked and the charismatic person that he really was appeared. He remained heroin free for six years, doing positive things, moving to London, studying to become an art psychotherapist, and finding a loving relationship with his partner and little son. Then came a couple of relapses. I think Jake wanted to show the world that he could succeed at everything. He would never have admitted it but the pressure he put on himself was too much, a scenario where heroin finds its way in. Jake was found dead at his home in London. The war on drugs failed our boys.

3. Cara: I lost my partner, and my son lost his father, because heroin users are criminalised. Watch

Cara's video at www.anyoneschild.org



When our drug laws harm an individual, they also harm the entire family. Jake was not just Rose's son and Jeremy's step son, he was my partner, and the father of our son too. He was also an artist, a poet, a dancer, a writer, a nursery nurse and soon to be a fully qualified art psychotherapist. He loved to make people laugh.

He told me when we first met that he had started to abuse alcohol and other drugs at a young age. He told me that as a teenager he'd been, caught, named and shamed in his local paper. Being labelled 'a hopeless druggie' helped send him further into substance abuse. Despite being exceptionally bright, Jake's teenage dabbles culminated in a crack and heroin habit. The death of his brother Roland from a heroin overdose, and his final stint in residential rehab, finally gave him the strength to stay away from all drugs, and when I met him he was five years drug-free. But the cravings never stopped and he would bury them in exercise.

Then when our son was 3 months old, Jake was accused of a crime he didn't commit. The police investigation re-awoke all his teenage feelings of fear, shame and judgement. And where his teenage feelings came, so followed his teenage habits. Five months later, Jake relapsed. Though he had no connections where we lived, he was able to obtain heroin and crack in just over an hour.

While the legal status of Jake's drugs of choice did not deter his use or his ability to obtain them, they did put us all at even greater risk than simply the use of the drugs alone. Risks from interacting with dealers – who would make repeated sales calls to chase the next purchase. Risks he would use impure substances and wouldn't know the strength of what he was taking, and the risk of a fine or imprisonment if caught.

Jake was a high functioning heroin user, good at disguising his habit. I thought he'd fully recovered from his first relapse in 2013. But in April 2014, he relapsed again – and this time, it killed him. Jake was a beautiful soul. He was a fantastic father. He was kind and generous. He was a hard worker. But he could never shake the sense of shame about his past. I believe that if Jake's drug use could have been treated as the medical issue it was, rather than the criminal issue it wasn't – he would still be alive today. If his drug of choice had been legally regulated, he could have sought help without fear of punishment. Father, partner, brother, uncle, son, grandson, friend and colleague. The world is not a better place for the loss of Jake Coe.

If there's a chance my son will want to experiment with drugs other than alcohol, I want him to be able to do it safely. I don't want his entire future to be ruined for the sake of a silly mistake or even a series of them. I'd rather he went to a licensed supplier than to a street dealer who could be selling him literally anything. I'd rather those drugs were properly researched and manufactured. I'd rather he had access to truthful and unbiased information about what exactly he was doing to himself. He has already paid too heavy a price of drug policies that are hinged on 'just say no'. Our drug policies have failed. They do more harm than good. They protect no one.

4. Mick and Hope: Our son's life has been blighted by the drug laws



Our son James was in his second year at Manchester University when it happened. We'd just come back from the local supermarket, when the phone rang, and our lives were changed forever. James was at a police station on a drugs charge. Neither of us knew much about illegal drugs, and I shudder now to think how ignorant we were. Like most parents we just hoped our kids would be okay, and any foolish things they might do were part of the growing up process. You have to let them go and University is where you are meant to learn, experiment and make mistakes. But if your son or daughter is unlucky enough to get caught on a drugs charge, they will be allowed no second chances. They will be criminalised, and can end up in prison even for a first offence.

James had taken his turn to get cannabis and ecstasy for his household of adult university friends. He made no profit but the drugs were cheaper if you got enough to last the term. They were in a bowl in the communal sitting room from which they all helped themselves. But James had told the truth about being the one to get them that time. Ecstasy is a class A drug and the law does not differentiate between a feckless student and a drug dealer. Prison is the only outcome for the intent to supply a Class A drug. We just could not believe that our son was going to go to prison. How were we all going to cope? Luckily the university showed better judgement than our courts, which are hog-tied by indiscriminate politically pre-determined minimum sentence and rigid guidelines. After he came out of prison having served 15 months

of his two-and-half year sentence, he went back to study and achieved a postgraduate Masters in biology and geology.

Prison can be very brutalising, and is the wrong place for most people. We learned a lot about the prison system and how it doesn't work. After James was sent down we were left reeling but we had little knowledge of what he would have to face. Even while we sat in the court wondering if we could find the strength to walk, James was being attacked in the holding cells by two men who decided they wanted his watch. When he got to Strangeways his cellmate was a Moss Side gangster who had chopped off the fingers of one of his victims, and stabbed a man in the heart. Luckily, we didn't hear about most of the horrifying experiences until they were over, as I don't know how we could have borne it. It is a long time ago now but nothing has changed. The profound after-effects are there and none of our family will ever fully recover. James's life has been blighted. No one could avoid being scarred by what he has experienced. And he still has a criminal record that has affected his career prospects. Despite his Masters Degree, he now sells carvings by the roadside.

When something so unjust happens, if it doesn't destroy you, you want to do something about it. So our family began to fight for an end to these cruel and draconian laws so others won't be afflicted in the same way. The voice of common sense is ready to be heard and **Anyone's Child** is bringing families together to make sure that it is. But for now, what happened to us could happen to you.

5. Katrina: My brother was marginalised and then murdered because of the drug war



After spending all my life and most of his occupying the role of wee sister, it is a strange reality that I'm now older than my big brother. He never made it to his 30th birthday. Never becoming an uncle to my daughter, whom he would have adored, is the saddest loss of all. Though I think I had expected to lose him. Alan had been a heroin user for over ten years. And because, as we are so often told, drugs are dangerous, wicked and bad, I presumed he'd die from an overdose or a batch of bad heroin. That's what happens to drug users after all. I never imagined he would be murdered.

The violence and senselessness of his death left me bewildered. How could this have happened to our family, to my brother? We had the same opportunities, upbringing and values yet our lives had become disparate. He had conformed to all the drug user stereotypes, ticking the boxes at various points over the years, but I like to think he was the most stable and well in the months leading up to his death. His murder. I find the word 'murder' difficult to apply to Alan's death. Inappropriate because it implies intent, whereas to me it is clear he was killed because of the life he led and the people he associated with.

Choices he made led to his death. But not the choice I had assumed could kill him. Changes he had made couldn't save him. The more I think about this the more unfair it seems. My whole family have been left devastated, lost and full of blame. We should have prevented his death, kept him safe, looked after him. The reality is there was very little we could do, as arguably the most dangerous side effect of drug taking had long since taken its toll. Though often underestimated, it was the illegality of his addiction that left us helpless, and pushed Alan to the edge of society, into a world of violence and danger that took his life.

In short, prohibition doesn't work. It instantaneously criminalises people who choose to use drugs. It keeps drugs in the hands of unscrupulous dealers, puts people at risk and creates chaos. I strongly believe that my brother would be alive and enjoying his niece if he had had access to safe, regulated and controlled drugs. I don't want any other family to go through the ongoing, drawn out devastation of losing a loved one the way we did: watching them spiral in and out of control, fearing for their existence every day, but feeling helpless. It's exhausting, all consuming and ultimately avoidable with a change to the law. The current system isn't working. We must look for a real alternative that helps drug users and their families.

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