

TORONTO CITY HALL COUNSEL AND TORONTO BOARD OF HEALTH

JULY 10, 2013

Good afternoon,

I appreciate being given this opportunity to have my voice and the opinion of myself and my deceased daughter, “Jac”, heard in this forum today.

My daughter died on August 21st of last year. She was an opioid addict for the last 18 of the 34 years that she lived.

For those 18 years I watched the decline of her mentality, her physical beauty, and her witty personality. I saw my daughter morph into a ghost of her former self as her lifestyle, her home, her relationship, her 3 young daughters and finally her dignity were replaced by drugs.

There are federal, provincial and municipal governmental officials, experts in the field of addiction and citizens who either have weighed in, or will weigh in, with their opinions for and against Safe Injection Sites.

Many who speak will base their opinion in this matter on their expertise; on their educational credentials; studies they’ve conducted; or may be a home or business owner who are concerned about bringing change to the landscape of their community.

I am an expert of a different sort. I bring an opinion based on my learned experience that comes from being an addict's mother and from the point of view of an addict who lost everything to addiction.

Near the end of her life Jac and I had many sole searching conversations; but there was one in particular that struck my heart cords. It was one in which she explained to me that "Drugs had dehumanized her."

The definition of dehumanization is described as the denial of humanness to a human being.

It is theorized to take on two forms: animalistic dehumanization and mechanistic dehumanization. It occurs through the language and actions that likens certain human beings, or groups of human beings, to non-human animals.

Dehumanization often ignores its target's individuality. The creative and interesting aspects of their personality are diminished or destroyed which only further prevents compassion from being shown towards these stigmatized groups of beings.

On January 9th, 7½ months before she died, I received a call from the emergency department of the hospital telling me Jac had arrived by ambulance and was being prepped for immediate surgery. She had presented with a form of flesh eating disease that had consumed the majority of both her legs and her left buttock. She was Hep C positive, malnourished, her white cell count was dangerously low, she had MRSA and was VRE and a whole lot of other things - but by that point I had

stopped listening. I am ashamed to say that out of all the things that nurse said to me that night I found the most important thing to be that my daughter had an illness. I was being told my daughter was about to face an amputation; that she could quite conceivably lose her life, and I was happy that I would not have to face anyone and tell them that she had passed from an overdose.

The fact she had an illness somehow made this tragic news feel different. I was capable of being compassionate towards her but only if she was dying from a disease that did not carry the stigma of addiction.

The first thing Jac said to me when she was out of surgery and lucid enough to talk was “I always believed I was going to die alone.”

My actions and attitude caused my daughter to believe that she was of such a class that she wasn't deserving of my compassion.

That is how I learned I had the capacity of dehumanizing someone to the point of them feeling they were totally unworthy of compassion. Not just my compassion, but anyone's compassion. She felt worthless, was treated as though she was worthless by most everyone and the only thing for her that felt different from worthlessness was being high on drugs. Sadly, the only thing that gave her an identity was the very thing that had taken it away in the first place. It begged me to ask the question- How can, and why would, an addict give up the euphoria they find in their drugs to face the degradation that society wants to brand them with?

This realization hit me harder than when the doctors informed us that indeed my daughter was going to lose her life. It caused me to finally lose my inhibitions and fears surrounding addiction. The opinions I held were based solely on what society had told me about addiction and addicts. I had never taken the time to form my own point of view.

The first step I took was to educate myself on the subject of addiction based on factual knowledge. I learned that while it may be a choice to use an opioid the first time, it could become an addiction from that point – or at any point – going forward. I learned about the chemical and physical changes that occur within the brain and body and the dependency that people can have on repeated daily patterns. I learned that many addictions are in conjunction with a mental illness and I also learned that my daughter had had a serious personality disorder that had gone undiagnosed. I learned that addiction is a disease and to treat it, and the human, like I would have had the disease been called anything other than addiction. I learned to love my daughter for everything she was and wasn't. I learned to listen and to base my ideals on facts and through gaining knowledge on things that I don't understand.

Safe Injection Sites are only one step; but is the first step in Harm Reduction and Re-Humanizing the addict. Our Compassion towards the addict and our informed understanding that addiction is a disease we can only empower and support the addict in making the change that we are desperate to see in them.

Is your opinion of addicts and addiction based on fact or what society would have you believe? Do you have the compassion to see beyond the addict with addiction to the human being with an illness?

I believe recovery from any illness is an opportunity that should be provided to and accessible by absolutely every human being – including the human being we label An Addict

Thank you for having me here to share the message that learned I only learned from my daughter's death.