

New substance abuse center at Akron Children's Hospital gets major funding from grieving family to fulfill "Alyssa's Promise"



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Alyssa Apostolakis wanted to be a counselor to help children and young adults struggling with drug addictions. Alyssa's own battle with drug addiction started at age 12, when she was prescribed opiates after surgery to repair a leg she broke on a trampoline. She then underwent a series of oral surgeries after she hit her head coming down a water slide at Disney World.

Her drug use escalated. She had many ups and downs, often staying clean for long lengths of time, said her parents, Lea Heidman and Brian Malone.

But even access to some of the best treatment programs in the country couldn't save her.

Now her parents are fulfilling her desire to help others by donating a total of \$300,000 in her memory toward an effort to launch an Addiction Services Program at Akron Children's Hospital.

The program — announced Wednesday afternoon — is focusing its first phase on education, prevention, screening care coordination, community outreach and referrals at Children's locations throughout Ohio. It also will offer medically assisted treatment for opiate addiction and an outpatient clinic as the program grows.

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Ohio has the second-highest rate of overdose deaths in the country and is at the epicenter of the opioid epidemic, said Children's Hospital President Grace Wakulchik.

"As a leader in pediatric care, we felt the need to be more strategic in our services — with the ultimate goal of preventing today's children and teens from becoming the next generation of adults struggling with lifelong addiction," she said.

For Alyssa, her drug use became worse in high school. The Montville Township native overdosed when she was 16 and spent time in Akron Children's Hospital's partial hospitalization program. She left that program and went directly to a residential program in Utah, where she stayed for 11 months. She then transitioned to a behavioral boarding school in North Carolina, where she graduated and went to college in North Carolina.

Her parents tried to be strict with her, limiting her access to money and requiring her to take a drug test every other week and meet with a psychologist.

Still, Alyssa struggled and hid her addictions from those closest to her, said Heidman, president and CEO of Golden Alliance Inc, which owns five McDonald's locations in the Akron area in Montrose, Norton, Wadsworth, Macedonia and Medina.

In March 2015, Alyssa seemed to be doing well, said Malone, Alyssa's stepdad who raised her and two siblings since they were young.

Her family thought she was clean. "We knew that she had a couple of lapses, but we did not know that the addiction had taken her so severely as it did. She was so stealth in hiding her addiction, even from her closest friends," her mother said.

On St. Patrick's Day that year, Alyssa stayed in her dorm room in North Carolina and studied instead of going out drinking, even though she had turned 21 the month before.

The next day, on March 18, Heidman and Malone received a phone call from the sheriff. Alyssa was dead from a heroin overdose.

Her family is unsure what happened. They only know that she overdosed on straight heroin. She was supposed to see the family for vacation in five days.

"What was ironic about Alyssa," said Malone, "was she wanted to help others rather than help herself. Even when she was going through all of this addiction, she'd be helping others through addiction, helping homeless people, but not looking at herself in the mirror and saying 'I need help myself.' "

The family quickly turned their grief into action. They established a non-profit organization, Fighting for Alyssa, (<http://www.fightingforalyssa.org>) which is dedicated to the awareness, prevention, and treatment of substance abuse and addiction.

The foundation is issuing its largest gift — \$100,000 — to support the new addiction services at Children's. Heidman and Malone also are personally giving \$200,000 to the effort, to total \$300,000 from their family and foundation over a five-year-period.

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A total of \$800,000 has been donated to the hospital to start the program, including a \$250,000 donation from FedEx Custom Critical and contributions from Marci Matthews, Harvey and Kim Nelson, Friends of Akron Children's Hospital, Bob and Regina Cooper and Don Sitts.

The opioid crisis "is having a major effect on our community and we must address it with the highest sense of urgency," said Virginia Addicott, president and CEO of FedEx Custom Critical. The funds will be enough to support a new case manager, Stephanie Strader, who will connect patients with resources and services at the hospital and in the community.

Younger children and teens tend to experiment with other substance and move to opioids as young adults, said Dr. Sarah Friebert, founder and medical director of the hospital's Haslinger Center Palliative Care Center.

But hospital staff are seeing the effects of the opioid epidemic, from addicted pregnant moms and their babies to toddlers accidentally ingesting drugs and school-age children "who live in homes where drug use is rampant and they're not getting their basic needs met," Friebert said.

The new program will centralize some of the hospital's inpatient and outpatient efforts and services at its pediatric offices to screen for substance abuse and offer assistance, she said.

The program can be reached at 330-543-3343

"There have been pockets of things we've offered throughout the organization, but there hasn't been any way to pull all of that together, to try to come together with a comprehensive strategy and one number to call," Friebert said. "If we're getting in early enough with these kids, if they never pick it up in the first place, if we are able to get in and get kids hooked up with appropriate counseling, they may not progress to addiction."

The educational materials handed out as part of the new center will be branded "Alyssa's Promise," in honor of her nickname, AP, and "the promise that she always wanted to help other people," said her mom. "She's doing that."

Heidman said she hopes the efforts can spare other parents from the pain of losing a child to an overdose death.

Alyssa wanted to beat her addiction and was ashamed by it, her stepfather said. She also lost two boyfriends to heroin overdoses and still couldn't get out of the addiction cycle. Heidman and Malone said they understand there was a mental health element, too, and their daughter may have been predisposed to addiction.

"She was tormented by this," said Malone. "We provided her with every opportunity we could and we would have continued to have done that but she just couldn't get out of that cycle. It's tragic."

Heidman said she had to fulfill her daughter's wishes by starting the foundation to help stop the opioid epidemic.

"How do you breathe in the last breath of your daughter? You do it through other people. So we chose to take her mission to help others."