

Family navigates grief a year after son's death

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Barry and Lisa Bennett hold a graduation photo of their son, 22-year-old Mason Bennett, who died a year ago Thursday.

Olivia Neeley | Times

After a fleeting moment of peace each morning, it doesn't take long for the gut-wrenching reality to set in for Lisa Bennett. "When you go to sleep and you wake up ... you have this brief second where you think everything is fine and (then) it hits you over and over again, day after day," she said through tears.

For Bennett, her reality is facing yet another day without her 22-year-old son, Mason Bennett. Thursday marks the first anniversary of his death. Bennett contends he died after taking what he believed was a 30 mg Percocet, a prescription painkiller.

"It wasn't a Percocet," Bennett said. "It was a pressed pill, which is mostly what's being sold now. There was nothing else in it other than cocaine and fentanyl."

Light Dark

Eight months after Mason's death, Wilson police charged 21-year-old Claire Brittle in connection with his death. Brittle faces a felony death by distribution charge as well as several drug-related charges.

Police said Brittle was "responsible for selling the victim narcotics at the time of his death," according to a Wilson Police Department press release. When police arrested Brittle in October, they found various drugs in her home, including "85 dosage units of pressed Percocet pills," according to arrest warrants.

Brittle was also charged with felony possession of a Schedule II controlled substance. Arrest warrants indicate that charge relates to fentanyl possession.

SOUNDING THE ALARM

Bennett is sounding the alarm on a disturbing trend that officials say has become another crisis in Wilson and across the country. Dealers are selling pills that resemble prescription medications like Percocet, Xanax, Klonopin and Adderall. Fentanyl, which is inexpensive and available in powdered form, can be dyed and pressed to make it look like any pill. People often believe they're taking one thing, but it ends up being a lethal dose of fentanyl. Bennett said she believes that's exactly what happened in her son's case.

Now Bennett and her husband, Barry, are on a mission to bring justice in their son's death and share Mason's story in an effort to save another life. Every time she reads about another young person's death linked to fentanyl, Bennett said it brings her to her knees.

"I know what their parents are feeling," she said. "I remember that moment."

'THERE'S SO MUCH OF IT'

Prior to her son's death, Bennett didn't know much about pressed pills and fentanyl. Fentanyl, which is 50 to 100 times more powerful than morphine, is a synthetic opioid that can be lethal even in small doses.

That's when she started her research. She even reached out to the Wilson County Substance Prevention Coalition.

“When people said fentanyl, I was thinking about what they give cancer patients, the patches,” she said. “What they are selling is not that. The majority of people that die from it are not purposely buying fentanyl. They are buying what they think is a pain pill or a Xanax. There’s so much of it.”

State figures show fentanyl-related deaths here and across the state have climbed in recent years. For example, there were two fentanyl-related deaths in Wilson in 2014, according to data compiled by the Wilson County Substance Prevention Coalition. By 2019, there were 17 fentanyl-related deaths, and in 2021, there were 25 deaths.

‘IT’S LIKE IT STABS YOU AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN’

Bennett’s grief is evident when she describes the pain of losing her son. He had a life ahead of him. While Mason wasn’t perfect, he had started building his life, she said.

Mason, a Wilson Early College Academy graduate, worked nearly full-time at Starbucks inside Wilson’s Target at the time of his death. The 22-year-old was also enrolled at Wake Technical Community College. Bennett said her son had recently finished applying to universities. After he died, Bennett and her husband started receiving their son’s acceptance letters.

“Every little thing,” Bennett said, trailing off in tears. “It’s like it stabs you again and again and again.”

She said everything her family imagined for their son’s life changed the moment he died.

Bennett said Mason was a happy-go-lucky kid with a good heart.

“One thing I know about Mason is that he never hurt anybody,” she said. “He was always for the underdog. He was a good kid.”

SENDING A MESSAGE

A recent change in the death by distribution law gives law enforcement and prosecutors another tool to go after those who cause a death by selling or

delivering an illicit drug. Bennett said she wants prosecutors in Wilson and across the state to go after those responsible for fentanyl deaths.

“I think they need to send a message,” Bennett said. “If you’re selling pills with fentanyl in them, to me it’s like attempted murder. If they die, it’s murder.”

District Attorney Jeff Marsigli told the Times for a January story that his office is committed to going after those who are selling the deadly drug. He said the distribution of fentanyl-laced pills has to be stopped, too.

A GENUINE PERSON

Bennett said the Wilson community has been an incredible support system for her and her family since Mason’s death. She has received messages from her son’s customers at Starbucks. One particular message meant a lot to her. A regular Starbucks customer said Mason was her favorite barista and she missed their talks.

“Mason was such a great person,” the woman wrote. “He was a genuine person.”

‘SHOULDN’T HAVE KILLED HIM’

Bennett said as she and her family navigate their grief, they’ve discovered there are things they can do and other things they can’t quite do just yet. It’s difficult for Bennett to be in another room with other grieving families who have lost their children. Bennett has instead channeled her energy into her son’s case and her efforts to spread the word about the dangers of fentanyl.

[Fentanyl Victims Network of North Carolina](#), a nonprofit, has been a valuable resource to Bennett over the past several months. Its representatives asked Bennett if Mason’s photograph could be included in a statewide billboard campaign the organization sponsored. One of those billboards was placed in Johnston County and flashed pictures of young people who have died as a result of fentanyl poisonings, she said.

While it was hard for the Bennetts to see the billboard, they wanted Mason’s story out there in hopes of saving another life.

“I don’t think any of us deserve to die from a mistake we made,” his mother said. “He made a really bad choice. He did. But he made a lot of really good choices in his life. This one bad choice that he made shouldn’t have killed him.”

‘A WAY TO REMEMBER HIM’

The Bennetts said the weeks leading up to the anniversary of their son’s death have been tough. Barry Bennett said he tries to stay busy tending to their Walstonburg farm, while his wife puts her energy into their son’s case. Both said they also spend a lot of time with their younger son, Lane.

The Bennetts have remembered Mason in various ways, including purchasing a memorial engraved fish on display at the N.C. Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores. Their family has a vacation beach home near there. They’ve also purchased another brick at Beaufort’s North Carolina Maritime Museum in his memory.

Back in their hometown of Moultrie, Georgia, the Bennetts placed an engraved brick in the downtown square as well as another memorial at Colquitt Regional Medical Center’s Kate Jeter Serenity Garden.

“It’s a way to remember him,” she said.



A picture of 22-year-old Mason Bennett is shown in his family’s living room. *Olivia Neeley | Times*