

RALEIGH, N.C. (WNCN) — Dozens of families from across North Carolina and beyond were together in Raleigh on Saturday, remembering loved ones who died from fentanyl poisoning.

“Matthew was my first grandchild, my first grandson, and I always called him my uno because he was my number one,” one woman said to a group at the Family Summit on Illicit Fentanyl Fatalities in North Carolina.

Family members said the names of victims and their forever ages.

“Jesse’s forever age is 26,” one mom said of a son she lost to fentanyl poisoning.

Families were crying together, hugging each other and remembering loved ones.

“This is my daughter, Sophia Walsh,” Barb Walsh, the Executive Director of Fentanyl Victims Network of NC and one of the organizers, said, showing a photo of her daughter who passed away.

“She was beautiful, she was smart, she was my only child, she was my everything,” Patricia Drewes, another organizer and the founder of Forgotten Victims of North Carolina, said of her daughter, Heaven Leigh.

Drewes said her daughter’s name was fitting.

“When they placed her in my arms, I knew right then that I was as close to Heaven as I’d ever be,” she said.

Heaven Leigh died after fentanyl poisoning in 2019.

“I felt so alone, I just felt as though I was the only person in the world this has ever happened to,” Drewes said.

Since then, Drewes has traveled the country sharing her daughter’s story and begging lawmakers to do more to get fentanyl off the streets. She has a tiny sidekick with her every step of the way— a son, now six-years-old, that Heaven Leigh left behind.

“He was only two-and-a-half when we lost his mom, so he doesn’t remember an awful lot,” Drewes said of her grandson, Cameron, who she is now raising.

Cameron does remember the love he felt from his mom.

“I know that she did love me very much,” Cameron said. “I loved her.”

Lori and Dean Ashenfelder say they relate to Drewes in the worst way. They lost their only son, Dean, better known as DJ, to fentanyl poisoning.

“I came downstairs on July 16, 2021, and I was too late,” his mom, Lori, said. “He was gone.”

The Ashenfelders say DJ was generous, smart and determined.

“He was an amazing young man, he had a brilliant sense of humor, he would give anyone off the shirt off his back,” his mother said, adding that he would help anyone in need. “Call him in the middle of the night, your car is broken down, he’s going to come fix it and he’s going to find six more things wrong with it and he’s going to set it up to fix those too.”

The families have something other than grief in common. They share a compulsion to make a change and save other families from suffering. Walsh says that starts with language.

“Every time they use the word ‘overdose,’ it introduces stigma into this whole issue,” Walsh said. “We need to actually start changing the terminology about how we describe these deaths.”

Families applauded North Carolina Attorney General Josh Stein’s push for a Fentanyl Control Unit in the state, but they still want harsher penalties in the courtroom.

“I would like to see death by distribution enforced in the state,” Drewes said. “I’m not seeing that.”

The Ashenfelders say they’ll continue to fight for these changes so no other parents have to bury their children. When asked what message they have for their son, DJ, the Ashenfelders said, “I miss you, I love you, we’re proud of you.”

Attorney General Stein is still pushing for funding for a Fentanyl Control Unit, but he says more resources also need to be given to individual District Attorney offices so they can prosecute these crimes.