

Family says guilty plea in daughter's fentanyl death is a step in the right direction



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GASTON COUNTY, N.C. — A 19-year-old man pleaded guilty in Gaston County to giving his 16-year-old girlfriend a pain pill laced with fentanyl.

Investigators said Abigail Saunderson died in September 2022 from fentanyl poisoning. Now, her family wants others to hear her story and stay away from dangerous drugs.

Saunderson's mother, Tracy Saunderson-Ross, said Nicholas Gage's guilty plea Monday was a big win for saving lives. She said the case was critical because more young people like her daughter are losing their lives to fentanyl, and it can be avoided.

Saunderson-Ross showed Channel 9's Ken Lemon a lock of her daughter's hair she brought with her to court.

"This is the last thing I will ever touch of my baby girl," she said.

She said her daughter asked Gage for a prescription pain pill last September. She said Saunderson didn't know the pill she was taking was laced with fentanyl, and it killed her.

"She was a little light in everybody's life. Anybody that met her," Saunderson-Ross said.

According to the nonprofit Fentanyl Victims Network, 13,376 people in North Carolina have died of fentanyl poisoning in the last nine years. That's more than the number of seats at the Charlotte Knights stadium.

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(Laura Wolff/Source: Charlotte Knights)

"It's a problem that needs to go away," Saunderson-Ross said.

Eight people in North Carolina die of fentanyl poisoning per day, and that number keeps climbing, according to the group's executive director Barbara Walsh.

Walsh sat next to Tracy Saunderson-Ross in court Monday holding a picture of her own daughter, who died of fentanyl poisoning two years ago.

"It is important to me because Sophia will never see justice," Walsh said.

She said it's especially important Gaston County. Only nine counties have more fentanyl deaths than Gaston does. Walsh said Gaston County also has an aggressive district attorney.

"It matters where you die in North Carolina," she said.

D.A. Travis Page made a commitment to pursue death by distribution charges in cases like the death of Abigail Saunderson. That means of sentence of anywhere from four to 32 years, depending on circumstances.

"Every young child that encounters fentanyl and loses a life, that life has value and I want to make sure that it's given value in the courtroom," Page said.

Gage's 16-month sentence comes with the condition that he testifies against the person who sold the pills to him.

“Hopefully we will get more and more sentencing, get these people off the street from killing our children,” Saunderson-Ross said.

The D.A. said he is also working with police to seize fentanyl and help people who are most susceptible to fentanyl poisoning.

Abigail Saunderson’s family is now sharing her story on billboards across the country -- even in Times Square -- to warn other families about the deadly problem.