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TOP STORY

EDITOR'S PICK

## Mother who lost son to fentanyl-related death organizes walk to raise awareness

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Mary Warstler of Morehead City and her granddaughter Brionna Camilo, 8, hold a photo of Warstler's son Daniel Cam who died in December from an illness related to fentanyl addiction. Warstler is organizing The Walk for Fentanyl Awareness and her granddaughter will also be involved. The walk will begin at 10 a.m. May 6, starting at West Carteret High School and ending at the Peer Recovery Center in Morehead City. (Cheryl Burke photo)

**MOREHEAD CITY** — A Morehead City mother who lost her son in December to a fentanyl-related death is turning her grief into action.

Mary Warstler of Morehead City is organizing The Walk for Fentanyl Awareness to fight back against the epidemic that is plaguing the county, state and nation.

"I'm hoping to raise awareness and want to see more education in our schools about this at a younger age," Warstler said. "I talk to a lot of young people that don't know what it is, and some have said if they get drugs from their friends, it is safe. But their friends are getting drugs from dealers, and they are not safe. I applaud what's being done so far by our officials, but more needs to be done."

She added that she is reaching out to other mothers who have lost children to drug overdoses.

"If I can save one mom from the hell I'm going through and what other moms are going through — if I can save somebody — this will be worth it," she said.

Her 37-year-old son, Daniel Camilo, died Dec. 22, 2022 from endocarditis, which is an infection of the heart that was related to his addiction, she said. He left behind an 8-year-old daughter, Brionna, who Warstler is raising and plans to have involved in the walk.

"She already understands the dangers of fentanyl and drugs," Warstler said.

The grieving mother is working with the Carteret County Health Department, the Carteret County Sheriff's Office and Morehead City Police Department to organize the event, which will start at 10 a.m. May 6 at West Carteret High School (WCHS).

Participants will meet at WCHS, cross Country Club Road and walk down the Morehead City walking trail, ending at the Peer Recovery Center parking lot. Booths will be set up to educate people on addiction and help that is available.

"Carteret County Health and Human Services will have a resource table about area addiction and recovery services at the community event," Dr. Randall Williams, director of Carteret County Health and Human Services, said.

Warstler added that she is making crosses that will be set up along the path, with each one representing a county resident who has died of a drug overdose in the past two years.

"I'm inviting anyone who has lost a family member to a drug overdose in the past two years to take a cross," she said.

According to Carteret County Sheriff Asa Buck, 31 people died of drug overdoses in the county in 2022, with seven so far in 2023.

He praised Warstler for turning her pain into something positive.

"I would like to thank Mary Warstler for organizing this walk and working to bring awareness to this terrible problem we are dealing with," Buck said. "I encourage our fellow citizens who wish to help to come out and support the awareness walk on May 6. We must all continue to work together to bring awareness to this issue and work towards solutions."

Buck has seen the devastating results of drug overdoses, especially those laced with fentanyl, a potent synthetic opioid drug approved by the Food and Drug Administration for use as an analgesic and anesthetic. Health officials say it is approximately 100 times more potent than morphine and 50 times more potent than heroin.

"More than 100 people have died in our county over the past three years due to drug overdose, the majority of which were fentanyl related," Buck said. "We must continue to educate everyone and especially our youth as to the dangers of using any drugs. There are no safe drugs. Fentanyl is now being put in various street drugs, not just heroin. A lot of the pills being sold are represented as pharmaceutical drugs but are actually fake pills that contain fentanyl. People need to realize that using any drug, such as marijuana (which is viewed as less harmful) can lead to addiction, which then leads to using harder drugs such as meth, heroin and fentanyl."

Williams, too, commended Warstler for her heroic efforts to tackle the escalating problem.

"Support groups play a vital role in recovery from substance misuse, and they can provide a network of similar individuals striving for change," Williams said. "One of the greatest fears for a parent is to lose a child and for some families this has become a reality when they lose a child to substance misuse. With continued awareness and prevention, these types of tragedies can be prevented from happening to other families."

Williams pointed out there were 38 drug overdose emergency calls in Carteret County from Jan. 1 to Feb. 24, 2023. Of those, 22 were suspected fentanyl-related overdose calls, with three deaths due to overdose.

Morehead City Police Chief Bryan Dixon agreed, also praising Warstler for her efforts.

"Fentanyl is now the number one cause of death for Americans ages 18 to 45 (according to Families Against Fentanyl)," Dixon said. "We will continue to work in concert with our law enforcement partners to prosecute the offenders behind this epidemic but realize this is only a component of the remedy. One of the first lines of defense against this killer is education or awareness, which plays a critical role in helping people understand just how lethal drug experimentation can be in today's world. Mary's personal tragedy is being turned into hope for others through The Walk for Fentanyl Awareness, and we are proud to support this endeavor."

Williams added that he is onboard with Warstler's call to get more education in schools about the dangers of fentanyl and other drug misuse.

"Early prevention and education programs are the main way of communicating with adolescents about addiction," Williams said. "County leaders, health officials, first responders and law enforcement are committed to working with our schools to provide resources and information that they can readily share with parents and students to help keep them safe."

He continued to point out that Carteret County is coordinating a substance misuse education campaign with an emphasis on fentanyl and addiction. Through the curriculum, health officials and law enforcement will be talking to students about the added danger fentanyl brings to drug use, social media targeting of drug use, the progression of addiction and substance use resources in the area.

"The program will be tailored to Carteret County students with local statistics and information," he said.

In addition to the fentanyl education campaign, Carteret County health officials have started to offer a youth e-cigarette prevention program called CATCH My Breath. This program is used to educate middle school youth about the dangers of vaping. The program provides up-to-date information to teachers, parents and health professionals to equip students with the knowledge and skills they need to make informed decisions about the use of e-cigarettes.

Williams said thanks to a six-month grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Foundation, the county is temporarily employing Brooke Barnhill to assist health officials develop a substance misuse outreach campaign targeting high school students.

Nationally, the Drug Enforcement Administration, on Aug. 21, 2022, recognized National Fentanyl Prevention and Awareness Day to educate the public on the serious dangers of fentanyl.

County officials encouraged those who are struggling with drug addiction to seek help.

Buck said, "Those who are already using drugs need to work towards recovery and getting off drugs. Their lives and possibly the lives of others depend on it. There are resources available to help. For many, it is hard to get off of drugs, but they have to try. Their lives are worth it."

Williams agreed.

"If you, or a loved one, needs help with substance use disorder, it's important to get help as soon as possible," he said, adding that a list of countywide and regional substance abuse resources is available at <http://www.cartercountync.gov/836/Health-Department>.

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