

Ashley Whaby Unknowingly Took Fentanyl and Died, So Why Has No One Been Held Accountable, Grandma Asks

HUMAN INTEREST





Ashley WhabyDebbie Peeden

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Ashley Whaby was found dead the day after a party where she may have unknowingly ingested fentanyl. No one has been charged in her death, and her grandmother, Debbie Peeden, wants answers.

Ashley Whaby was at a party with a few friends one fall night in 2021 when she ingested a drug she believed she had used many times before. But unbeknownst to her, it was laced with a lethal dose of fentanyl, her loved ones say.

Ashley's death left Debbie Peeden, her grandmother and the woman who raised her, with a life-altering wound and an unbreakable resolve for answers. But thus far, she's gotten few that have satisfied her, she tells Inside Edition Digital in an in-depth interview.

Instead, all she can do, she says, is write letters to Ashley that she will never read.

“That day when you were left all alone, were you afraid? That day did you cry out for me or Poppa or your Mom,” Peeden wrote to her granddaughter after her death. “That day the angels came, did you finally feel at peace? That day God healed you from your struggles as we had prayed he would, just not in the way we had hoped!”

Ashley, 23, had long struggled with drug addiction. But Peeden does not believe Ashley willingly

ingested fentanyl, and that those who knew the drug was not what it was advertised to be should have to pay for the life that has been taken. Peeden has tried tirelessly to piece together the events of that dreadful night, but says she's been met with inaction by authorities, including **police** who listed the probe into Ashley's death as "inactive" just four days after it occurred.

Justice, it appears, doesn't exist for those with addictions, the grandmother says.

The Life and Death of Ashley Whaby and the Devastation That Followed

Ashley was beautiful inside and out, her grandmother says. She loved animals, family, friends, four-wheeling and going fishing. She was empathetic to those less fortunate and to those that were hurt like her, Peeden says.

From the beginning, Ashley faced significant challenges in life. She came under Peeden's care when she was 12 weeks old and began permanently living with her grandmother when she

was 5. Peeden raised her as her own alongside her other children.

For most of her life, Ashley also struggled with mental illness. She lived with bipolar disorder and struggled with addiction for more than a year before getting clean in 2021. And then, she witnessed the suicide of a close friend.

She spiraled. And though she looked for help, she was unable to secure a spot in a rehab facility. Once again, she succumbed to the throes of addiction. Then on Oct. 7, 2021, Ashley went to a party with friends.

There, she took what she thought was cocaine, her grandmother says. It was the last thing she ever did.

The Many Questions That Surround Ashley Whaby's Death

Ashley Whaby was found dead on Oct. 8, 2021 in the apartment where the party took place. She was found 12 hours after she is believed to have died, authorities said, ruling her death an “accidental

overdose” due to “fentanyl, cocaine toxicity,” according to toxicology reports.

Someone at the apartment informed Peeden of her granddaughter’s death before police did, she tells Inside Edition Digital. The speed at which police could inform Ashley’s next of kin of her death was impacted by the time it took to process the scene, Mary Nero, a victim’s advocate for the Greensboro Police Department, told Peeden.

“On any given scene this can take at least several hours, sometimes as long as 8-12 hours,” Nero wrote in an email sent to Peeden on Nov. 19, 2021 that Peeden provided Inside Edition Digital. “It also takes a certain amount of time for the on-call detective to be contacted at home and respond to the scene to get the investigation moving.”

The amount of cocaine in the substance Ashley consumed would not have been fatal, Peeden says she was told by the chief toxicologist in the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. The amount of fentanyl present, however, was fatal, she says she was told. “It’s what he told me. It was the fentanyl that killed her,” Peeden says. The Office of the Chief Medical

Examiner did not respond to Inside Edition Digital's requests for comment on Ashley's autopsy or the substances she was determined to have ingested before her death.

Peeden says she knows that her granddaughter would not have knowingly consumed **fentanyl** and she believes for that reason, Ashley was poisoned. "If I were to meet you at a restaurant and I gave you a glass of wine and I put arsenic in it and you died, did you overdose? Or were you poisoned?" she says.

But that's as far as the official narrative on Ashley's death goes. From there, all Peeden has to go on is her intuition. She says she's been met with questionable recountings of the events that occurred on the night Ashley died from those who were there and willing to talk. Those happy to engage in the gossip that spread in the days and weeks after Ashley's death have further muddied the waters. And so Peeden is focused on drumming up interest in her granddaughter's story and spreading awareness to others whose loved ones are at risk of finding themselves in similar situations.

“I knew within a matter of days of her poisoning that I was going to need to do something, that I was going to need to advocate, that I was going to need to fight for her, that I was going to need to fight for other families and to stand with the families who have lost their children from fentanyl poisoning,” Peeden says.

But without a thorough police investigation, Peeden has few next steps to take. Peeden says she was unable to get police to return her phone calls or emails in the days following Ashley’s death. She went to the police station in person one month after Ashley’s death hoping that would be more productive than the attempts she made over the phone. It was then that she says police told her Ashley’s case had been listed as inactive.

The case was designated as inactive on Oct. 12, 2021, three days after Ashley’s body was found. The toxicology report, obtained by Inside Edition Digital, was released 49 days after the case was designated as inactive, on Nov. 30, 2021.

“I kept asking the police, who sold her or who gave her the fentanyl, who gave her the fentanyl? They

didn't even look and ask, who gave fentanyl? Nothing was ever asked,” Peeden says.

Fentanyl Poisoning in North Carolina: A Huge Problem That Peeden Says Is Going Unaddressed

In North Carolina, fentanyl was responsible for 3,163 deaths in 2021, according to the North Carolina Medical Examiner.

Fentanyl poisoning is becoming increasingly prevalent in the U.S., the data collected shows. Of the 107,375 overdose deaths in 2021, 67% of those were due to synthetic opioids such as fentanyl, according to the CDC.

Due to the increasing number of deaths from the opioid pandemic, North Carolina passed a law in 2019 that cracks down on those selling controlled substances such as fentanyl. Under the “death by distribution” law, a dealer found selling a controlled substance that led to someone’s death could face a Class C felony charge.

Under such a law, whomever was found to have given Ashley the drugs she ingested before she died could be prosecuted, Peeden says she believed. But in a Dec. 9, 2021 email sent to Peeden that she provided Inside Edition Digital, Nero said that would not be the case, as the Guilford County District Attorney's office will not prosecute "death by distribution" cases.

"The detectives' efforts have to be focused on where they can make criminal charges as they're the first line of the criminal justice system," Nero wrote. "As where you find these to be excuses and not answers, I'm providing an explanation of why things are the way they are. This is not a perfect system by any means and I'm not trying to sell it as such."

Nero did not respond to Inside Edition Digital's request for comment and instead forwarded the request to the Greensboro Police Department's public information officer, who said in an email, "We will not be releasing any information regarding this case. There will be no further communication with Ms. Peeden from the Criminal Investigations, reference same. Ms. Peeden has the option of filing a complaint with Professional Standards Division

regarding allegations of discourteous behavior or general conduct."

The Guilford County District Attorney's office tells Inside Edition Digital there was "clearly no evidence supporting charges against whomever was responsible for providing the lethal drugs causing death."

"Simply put, no one was identified as the source for the drugs, a critical element to the crime being investigated," the district attorney's office said. But Peeden says the investigation was cut short before a suspect was identified and all lines of inquiry were not followed that could have led police to answers.

Nero wrote Peeden again on Jan. 3, 2022. "District Attorney's office will not prosecute this as a homicide even if the Medical Examiner does declare cause of death as fentanyl toxicity because their position is that the victim willing(sic) ingested the substance knowing the risk that we were taking," Nero wrote in the email.

This round-robin of sorts from the very people who Peeden thought would be responsible for looking

into the death of her beloved granddaughter has been devastating. “People who have substance use disorders, they're all somebody's someone, and she was ours,” Peeden says.

Nationally, unlawful distribution of fentanyl resulting in death is a class 1 drug felony, while unlawful distribution of cocaine is a class 3 drug felony. And though difficult to prosecute, it is not unheard of. Stephen Walter was sentenced to 17 1/2 years in prison for his role in supplying fentanyl-laced pills that played a part in rapper **Mac Miller's fatal drug overdose in 2018**. His sentence came after he pleaded guilty to a federal criminal charge of distribution of fentanyl in a California court. Ryan Michael Reavis was sentenced to nearly 11 years for distributing the pills that contributed to Miller's death. The case against a third co-defendant is still pending.

Peeden says she believes her granddaughter's death was brushed aside because of her granddaughter's struggles with addiction and her lack of status in the community. “It's like that's why they didn't **investigate** because to them she was just another dead addict. Her life didn't mean

anything to them, her life had no value to them,” she says.

According to an email from Nero to Peeden, police questioned the apartment’s occupant and one other person at the scene, but Peeden says both were impaired at the time. Nero wrote that one person who was in the apartment at the time was questioned about why he waited two hours to make the 911 call “but had no good answer.” Investigators pushed no further and sought out no other witnesses, according to Peeden, because the authorities told her they would just lie.

But there are threads of investigation that Peeden says she has uncovered that police could work. A spoon with white powder residue Peeden says the coroner told her was found near Ashley was not observed at the scene by police and someone in the apartment took Ashley’s car keys to run errands at about 11 a.m. on Oct. 8, according to emails sent from Nero to Peeden. By the medical examiner’s estimation, Ashley was dead by then. According to a patient record, the time between Whaby’s collapse and when EMS was called was around 13 hours.

"Well, why did they wait?" Peeden says. "They could not give us a reasonable explanation."

Ashley Whaby's Grandmother Is Heartbroken But Devoted to Raising Awareness

While Peeden has not gotten justice for her granddaughter's death, she has found meaning in spreading awareness of the dangers of **fentanyl poisoning**. Peeden is a part of the Forgotten Victims of the Piedmont Triad, which raises awareness about the dangers of fentanyl.

"We're fighting for our children. We can't bring our child back, but we can fight for your child. We want to make sure that the state of North Carolina has a state-mandated protocol that every county, every city has to follow," says Peeden about the group's efforts.

Peeden, as well as other families, has partnered with **4 Them We Fight**, an organization that supports communities and families affected by the fentanyl poisoning crisis. The organization started

The Billboard Project to spread awareness of the drug that has devastated many.

“They put up billboards all across the country, and they have ... all these beautiful faces of all these angels that have passed away from fentanyl poisoning,” Peeden says. “I knew that I wanted to do a billboard just for her in my area here in North Carolina.”

Peeden also traveled to Washington D.C. in 2022 for the second annual Lost Voices of Fentanyl Rally. “Seeing all those thousands and thousands of beautiful faces that had their life stolen from fentanyl was a very emotional, heartbreaking experience, but beautiful at the same time,” she says.

Losing her granddaughter changed her forever, but Peeden does not want Ashley’s death to be in vain. She hopes her work and the story of Ashley’s death will help raise awareness that laws in place to prosecute these offenses are seemingly not being enforced. She is not ashamed of how Ashley died, but of how her death hasn’t been valued by those in the power to serve and protect, she says.

She often returns to the letter she wrote Ashley after her death, reexamining the vows she made in it to remind herself of what's at stake. "I promise you people will know your story! People will know you had a pure and innocent heart! You loved your family and friends," Peeden wrote. "I promise I will continue to fight for justice for you."