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FEATURED TOP STORY

Winston-Salem mother searches for answers after son dies from fentanyl overdose.

Scott Sexton

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A billboard on Salem Parkway near Miller Street is dedicated to fentanyl victims and their families, including local teen Jeremiah Scales.

Walt Unks, Journal

Scott Sexton

For six long months, Andrea Scales didn't know for sure how her only son died.

It took that long for a toxicology screen run by the state medical examiner's office to come back with a ruling: fentanyl poisoning.

Someone slipped her son what he surely thought was a Percocet pill. Instead, the pill contained fentanyl, a powerful synthetic opioid similar to morphine, and it took his life.

Jeremiah “J5” Scales, an accomplished athlete at Parkland High School, was 19 years old.

“I knew nothing about fentanyl ... one Percocet doesn’t kill you,” Scales said. “It was the last thing I ever expected.”

Now, a little over a year since she buried Jeremiah, she’s decided to see if she could save another mother from feeling the same crushing pain.

She allowed a photo of her son to be included on a month-long billboard campaign to educate and raise awareness about an epidemic that has killed thousands of North Carolinians.

“It just hurts ... extremely painful to live without your only child,” Scales said. “Yes, I’m all for educating other people about it and doing whatever I can do.”

Not as easy thing

Between 2013 and August 2022, 13,376 North Carolinians died from using illicit fentanyl - 523 in Forsyth County.

Drug dealers often make powdered fentanyl, a synthetic opioid similar to morphine, in illicit labs. They either sell it as is, put it in pills that resemble prescription painkillers or mix it in other powdered narcotics such as heroin and cocaine.

It is cheaper and, according to the National Institutes on Health, 50-100 times more potent than morphine. It’s highly addictive and deadly.

And many times, a victim can take fentanyl without even knowing what it was. That’s what happened to Jeremiah Scales.

So when the founders of the Fentanyl Victims Network of North Carolina and the Forgotten Victims of North Carolina approached her about including Jared along with 18 other victims on two digital billboards in Forsyth County, Scales was all in.

The billboards - one on Salem Parkway near Miller Street and a second farther east on Salem Parkway near Linville Road were unveiled last week and will be displayed for the next month.

Each features photos of victims, identifies them by first name and tells something about their life.

Scales and other grieving families went to a public unveiling that was to be partly a news conference about the campaign and partly a chance to talk about a loved one.

It's not an easy thing.

Jeremiah graduated from Parkland in 2021 and was starting to find his way in the world.

"He was a remarkable individual. A great kid. He'd do anything for you," Scales said.

"Of course every mother would say that. But he was so lovable ... this has just destroyed me and our family."

Tens of thousands of motorists will pass by the billboards every day for a month. Every death is as different as the individual lives lost.

Some victims struggle with addiction. Others succumb while experimenting.

Despite good intentions and the best research into addictions, stigma and ignorance still comes with any discussion of education, harm reduction, treatment, funding and compassionate care.

And yet mothers such as Andrea Scales still say “yes” when asked to support the campaign while knowing full well that they’ll be revisiting the most difficult moments of their lives.

An act of grace

Scales has her suspicions but still doesn’t know for sure who gave her son fentanyl.

He was with friends the afternoon of June 3, 2022, and called her at work about 4 p.m. to say that he was going swimming with friends.

Six hours later, he was found unresponsive and taken to the emergency room. But it was too late.

“The people who were with him did not talk to the police,” Scale said. “They did not disclose who gave it to him and they still won’t.”

As is the case with anyone as young as Jeremiah, an autopsy was ordered along with a tox screen. Six months later Scales learned his cause of death.

The investigation, what there was of one, was closed. “That’s a shame,” Scales said.

As for the person who supplied a fatal dose of fentanyl, Scales allows that “for his peace of mind, I just hope it wasn’t intentionally done to my child.”

It’s a remarkable act of grace and, if not quite forgiveness, a step toward easing the natural bitterness any parent would feel.

For the time being, every day for the next month while the campaign runs, Scales will go by and look up at a photo of her son.

“I will carry it the rest of my life,” Scales said. “It may get a little easier but I don’t know. ... Saturday was a year (since he died).

“Jeremiah was not one who would want it swept under a rug so yes, I will do whatever I can.”

