

'Is this Taylor Miller's mother?' Family opens up about 19-year-old's overdose death

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By **Elizabeth Cook**



JON C. LAKEY / SALISBURY POST Amy Morris, the adoptive mother of Taylor Elizabeth Miller, describes the turmoil she and her family as endured dealing with the drug addiction of Taylor that eventually lead to her death due to Heroin overdose 7 months ago in November of 2017. Monday, July 2, 2018, in Salisbury, N.C.

This is the first story in a two-part series.

By **Elizabeth Cook**

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SALISBURY — The message on White House stationery is brief.

The president thanks Amy Morris of Salisbury for her letter about daughter Taylor's overdose and death in November 2017. He and Melania send their prayers, he says. And he pledges his commitment to battle the opioid epidemic.

"My Administration is fighting this crisis on all fronts, and examples like yours motivate me to keep up the fight," the letter says.

Below was his distinctive signature in bold, black ink: Donald J. Trump.

Amy was shocked to receive the response. The president's message mentioned Taylor by name. Amy believes Trump wants to see change.

But she is not waiting around to see what happens. She's sharing the story of her daughter's death to bring opioids out of the forgotten shadows and open other parents' eyes.

"My concern is I don't want to see another mother go through the heartache that I went through," Amy says, "and I know that it's happening over and over."

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Taylor Miller

Taylor Miller had long dark hair, expressive brown eyes and a 19-year-old's sense of invincibility — even after a heroin overdose landed her in intensive care in January 2017.

That was her first overdose.

Taylor had been in and out of trouble with drugs. Amy says it started with “Triple C,” heavy doses of cold medicine Taylor and her friends took to get high. Then came marijuana. Then synthetic marijuana.

Someone close suggested she give heroin a try. Once Taylor crossed that threshold, there was no going back.

In his book on the opiate epidemic, “Dreamland,” journalist Sam Quinones writes about “The Molecule,” the morphine molecule that is in all opiates. He writes that it fits “key in lock” into receptors in the brain and spine and creates intense euphoria.

The user soon craves that euphoria again.

The morphine molecule effectively brainwashes people, Quinones says, “pushing them to act contrary to their self-interest in pursuit of the molecule.”

Heroin took over Taylor's life, her family says. She tried rehab more than once and went through detox, after-care, 12-step meetings. Amy and her husband, Rick, offered Taylor incentives to stay clean and hold down a job — even a car. “It would work for a while,” Taylor's brother Eddie says. But she kept going back to heroin.

Amy remembers getting the phone call in early 2017 from a nurse at High Point Regional. “Is this Taylor Miller's mother?” she heard the voice on the phone ask.

“My heart dropped.”

Amy arrived at the hospital to find her daughter unconscious and on a ventilator. After Taylor came to on the third day, Amy used her phone camera to record her first few minutes of groping about, looking groggy and mumbling incoherently. Later she showed it to Taylor.

“It seemed to make an impression on her at first,” Amy says.

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Taylor's family situation was complicated. Hers was an open adoption, so she knew her birth father and had regular contact with him. Her adoptive parents split up several years ago, and she stayed with her adoptive father a couple of years, until late 2012, when she was 15.

Amy got full custody then, but she knows Taylor communicated with her adoptive dad behind her back and struggled with feelings of abandonment. The family's dysfunction affected them all.

Taylor often turned to her older brother for help.

Eddie says the Taylor he knew was charismatic and loving. Then she started rebelling, and drugs entered the picture. “You could start to see the difference in the person she was.”

Taylor was always looking for a way to get more drugs, and she played her parents against each other, Eddie says. She bounced around from household to household. In June 2015, she graduated from South Rowan High School.

Her birth father gave her money whenever she said she needed something, but Amy says Taylor used it to buy drugs. Amy finally told him to stop helping Taylor, and he agreed.

Two days later he ran into the back end of an 18-wheeler and died. Taylor's last conversation with him had not ended well, Eddie says, and his death hit her hard.

Still, by the summer of 2017, after the overdose and treatment, Amy says she thought her daughter was clean. Taylor moved into a trailer near Amy and Rick and regularly walked over to have dinner with them. Sometimes she'd stick

around for a movie.

As time went by, though, she'd eat and say she had to go.

“I never thought much about that at the time,” Amy says. “Now, I look back and wonder, was it a sign that I missed?”

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The second and last overdose came last November, on the 25th.

It was the day before Taylor’s 20th birthday, and she asked Amy to put \$20 in her bank account so she and a girlfriend could go shopping at the mall.

“Thank you,” Taylor texted. “Love you.”

“Love you too,” Amy replied.

That evening around 6, Taylor called Eddie and asked him to come pick her up at a friend’s house. By the time Eddie got there, she had changed her mind. He urged her to come with him anyway. He’d take her out to eat, he said.

“I tried and tried and tried,” Eddie says.

In hindsight, he knows she had gotten a text from someone who could get heroin for her, and nothing Eddie or anybody else said would have made a difference.

Unless an addict wants to be clean, Eddie says, there’s no stopping them from chasing that next high. “It could be the president of the United States; you’re not going to sway them.”

That was the last time anyone in the family saw Taylor alive.

A few days later Eddie would return to the place where Taylor died and demand to see surveillance video. After viewing the video and talking to people at the scene, he and the family pieced together what they believe happened that night.

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Taylor went with a young man to Center Motel in Kannapolis. They checked into Room 11 around 7:30 p.m.

About two hours later, the man opened the door slightly and left. “He basically slithered out of the door,” Eddie says.

The man went to the room where the couple who rent out the rooms stayed. He reportedly told them he was going to get \$20 that he owed them for the room and would be back.

“He gets in his car, leaves and never comes back,” Eddie says.

After waiting a while for him to return, the woman who handled the rent went to Room 11 and entered. The family believes Taylor was on the bed, unresponsive and overdosed. Police later found needles on the table and in the trash.

Amy says the woman called the motel owner, who told her to wait for the \$20.

Hours pass. After midnight, the motel owner arrived, went to Room 11 and saw Taylor’s body. By this time she was cold to the touch. A call went in to 911 — over three hours after the family believes the woman first found Taylor unconscious.

First responders came, but it was too late to revive her. Taylor was dead.

Cause of death: acute cocaine, heroin, fentanyl and acetylfentanyl intoxication.

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Coming Monday, Part 2: The lessons and aftermath of Taylor’s death.

Taylor Miller: Lessons from one family's opioid death

Published 12:10 am Monday, July 23, 2018

By **Elizabeth Cook**



JON C. LAKEY / SALISBURY POST An urn containing the cremated remains of Taylor sits on a table with personal items and photographs. Amy Morris, the adoptive mother of Taylor Elizabeth Miller, describes the turmoil she and her family as endured dealing with the drug addiction of Taylor that eventually lead to her death due to Heroin overdose 7 months ago in November of 2017. Monday, July 2, 2018, in Salisbury, N.C.

Second in a two-part series

By Elizabeth Cook

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SALISBURY — As she did many nights, Amy Morris texted her 19-year-old daughter, Taylor Miller, before she went to bed on Nov. 25.

“U home,” she texted at 10:45 p.m.

Amy fell asleep waiting for a reply, only to be awakened at 3 a.m. by what she describes as hammering on the back door. She remembered that she hadn’t heard back from Taylor.

“I got to the end of the hall and saw the blue light.”

Three Salisbury police officers were at the door, and one asked if she and husband Rick were Taylor Miller’s parents. The officers advised them to get in touch with Kannapolis Police.

A Kannapolis officer told Rick that Taylor had been found dead in a room at the Center Motel. Several syringes were on a table and in the trash can.

About 30 people were killed by heroin, fentanyl, Oxycontin and other opioids in Rowan County in 2017, and hundreds more were treated for overdoses. Headlines about the epidemic peaked last summer after fentanyl caused a string deaths and a young couple overdosed on a downtown sidewalk, with their child in a pickup nearby.

Opiates continue to run like a river through Rowan, though, and addiction touches thousands of families.

That’s why Amy is sharing Taylor’s story — to spur other parents to fight hard to save their children’s lives.

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After getting Taylor’s phone and reading her texts and messages, Amy says she knows her daughter went out that night expecting to buy China White, a potent form of heroin. But illicit drugs can contain just about anything.

Kids naively think of dealers as their friends, Amy says.

“These people do not care about you,” she says. If you overdosed in their car, she says, they’d push you out and drive on.

Or abandon you in a motel room.

A small memorial to Taylor in the Morris' den includes smiling photos, a bejeweled hair comb, the pacifier holder Taylor used as a toddler — along with her death certificate and an urn holding her ashes.

Cause of death: acute cocaine, heroin, fentanyl and acetylfentanyl intoxication.

The family knew Taylor struggled with addiction; she'd been hospitalized after an overdose earlier in the year. But she had gone through treatment and was doing better, Amy thought.

Taylor's older brother, Eddie, was less optimistic.

"When someone gets that bad, they're very good at manipulating it and hiding it," he says.

He could tell that Taylor wanted to get away from heroin.

"We had many conversations about it," Eddie says. "There was never any real help ... You can't just walk to the hospital and say, 'I'm a heroin user and I need help.' There's something that needs to be done."

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The family believes the man who took Taylor to the motel provided the drugs that killed her — and should be charged in her death.

Eddie didn't wait for police to investigate. He talked to people who knew Taylor, figured out who the man was, got his number and called him.

"He admitted to leaving her there," Eddie says. "He said he thought she was fine because she's been doing it for awhile."

The man denied supplying the lethal drugs, Eddie says. He reportedly said that a message he'd left Taylor about bringing her "1g" referred to marijuana, not heroin.

Eddie turned the information over to police, who brought the man in for questioning twice.

"We weren't able to develop probable cause," says Lt. Chris Hill of the Kannapolis Police Department. "At the end of the day, it comes down to what you can prove."

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David Ramsey, chief deputy of the Rowan County Sheriff's Office, says he feels bad for Taylor's family.

Some prosecutors are willing to go after suspects like the man who was with Taylor, Ramsey says, but charging someone in a death like hers is a challenge. "How do you prove the drug came from that person?"

Ramsey says investigators know exactly who provided a fatal dose of meth to young Rowan woman killed a few years ago, but there was a gap of time between when she got the meth from the suspect and when she died. Someone could argue that the woman already had other drugs with her. So no one was charged.

Black tar heroin dominated here for a while, but Ramsey says white powder heroin — like the China White that Taylor sought — has moved in. Most of it comes from Mexico, by way of metro Charlotte, and it's often laced with the more potent fentanyl.

Meth may be the most prevalent illicit drug in Rowan now, Ramsey says, but heroin is right there with it. "Those drugs are like brothers and sisters."

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The Rev. Garland Faw officiated at the small family service for Taylor at Summersett Funeral Home Chapel a week after her death.

Taylor's stepfather, Rick, found comfort in Faw's message asserting that many people have addictions — cigarettes, shopping, food.

"God doesn't turn away the addicts," Rick says. "God was tired of her living that way. He called her home."

Faw says he has officiated at the funerals of other people who have overdosed, but not many. "It's a very difficult thing to do, because in most cases this is something that slipped up on people."

He describes Taylor as "a sweet girl, as precious as she could be," but says she went down the wrong road.

"A lot of people loved her and tried to help her."

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A lot of "if only" thoughts have crossed Amy's mind.

- If only the man with Taylor had called 911, first responders might have saved her with the overdose-reversing drug naloxone. He couldn't be criminally charged just for getting an overdose victim help.
- If only the woman at the motel had taken action when she first saw Taylor unresponsive, might responders have been able to save her then?
- If only she herself had been more insistent, Amy thinks, would Taylor have stuck with recovery and sought more treatment?
- If only more long-term treatment facilities were available and affordable, Taylor might have had a better chance of overcoming her addiction. Detox was not enough.

And so on.

Joining Facebook groups for mothers of overdose victims has been a big help, Amy says. They share their pain and find comfort in knowing they are not alone. They miss the children they lost — children who are gone yet always with them, always on their minds.

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Amy and Rick were heading out of town to Holden Beach recently when they came upon three cars “parked weird” on the side of Stokes Ferry Road with some people standing around it, Amy says. From her seat in their SUV, Amy could see a young woman passed out in the driver’s seat with a baby crawling over her lap.

Another overdose.

Amy told Rick to stop. She jumped out, opened the door of the young woman’s car, grabbed the baby and handed the child to one of the onlookers.

Does anybody have Narcan? she asked. No response.

Does anybody know how to do CPR? Again, no response.

They removed the woman from the car. For the first time since she learned it 30 years ago, Amy started CPR and stayed with it until first responders arrived and took over, she says.

After it was all over, Amy couldn’t believe what she’d done.

“It wasn’t me,” Amy says. “I really feel like it was Taylor pushing me out the door, telling me, ‘Go, Mom, go.’”