

October 19, 1983 was the beginning of a new and exciting adventure in my life; the birth of our son Ryan Lee Cox. As parents, we all believe our children are special, and I am not any different. Ryan was a very beautiful child. He loved his dad and me, he loved his little brother, he loved his family, and he loved God. Ryan was very athletic and excelled in every sport he participated in. He played football, basketball, baseball and raced motocross competitively. He was also extremely intelligent. When he was in the seventh grade, he participated in the Talent Identification Program conducted by Duke University and was recognized as Mathematically and Verbally Gifted.

But things changed when he got in high school. Ryan had a good friend whose mom had substance abuse problems. Instead of letting that child stay weekends by himself, I invited him into our house. Those weekends sometimes turned into weeks. I loved this boy as he was my own. I think that possibly in my efforts to help this youth, doors were opened for Ryan. Doors that I wish would have remained closed. I don't blame the mom or Ryan's friend. Blame has no use. Ryan dropped out of sports, his grades began dropping and he was skipping school. He became depressed and agitated, but through it he still remained loving. He managed to graduate, but things just got worse. After graduation he went into a rehabilitation center in Raytown, Missouri, but did not complete the program. Upon returning to Topeka, he still hung out with the same people, therefore doing the same bad habits. I tried to rescue him, tried everything I could possibly think of. He had a wonderful, drug-free fiancé who tried to rescue him. He had a dad, little brother, and devoted family who tried to rescue him. He would have good weeks, but the end result was always the same, he would succumb to the drugs that had such a strong hold on him. Drugs that medicated the depression and social insecurities he felt.

I cannot specifically tell you what the turning point in Ryan's heart and mind was to make a change. Was it the gangrene he developed in his arm from shooting up, the grand mal seizures he started having, the jobs he lost, the friends he lost, the fiancé he was about to lose, the pain and helplessness in his friends and family's eyes or the tears in his little brother's eyes? I believe in my heart it was the result of answered prayers. He decided to go into rehab one more time, this time completing the program. Upon leaving the program, he still fought the addiction and was not sure what he wanted to do with his life. He decided he wanted to join the Army. He had to have 10 tattoos that were on his knuckles removed by acid and of course he had to stay clean. He was determined. He stayed clean, worked with my dad and lived with my parents.

Easter Sunday, 2006: Ryan was scheduled to leave for the Army in 6 days. The family was together at my parent's house to celebrate the resurrection of Christ. Ryan was anxious in anticipation of his departure. At one point he asked me to take him somewhere just to get something one more time to relieve the anxiety. I denied his request and thought I had talked him through it. When I left I hugged him and told him I loved him. Little did I know that would be the last time I would ever hug my loving, beautiful son alive. After I left, he found someone to take him. Later that night, my dad found him downstairs with a needle in his arm. Ryan called me, crying uncontrollably. I reassured him I loved him, that he had messed up, but to go to sleep and wake up the next day and start again.

The next day the phone rang at 6:30 AM. All I remember of the phone call is my dad saying "you have to be strong....Ryan is dead." When I got to their house, he was lying on the floor,

beautiful, strong, lovely, but the life was gone. The battle had been lost as a result of that one last fix that he thought he needed and was able to get so easily through a selfish, lazy, worthless man. His life had been snuffed out. Did this man intentionally kill my son? No. Did he make him do the drugs? No. Has he since sold drugs? Yes. Did he care? No. He actually ran across Ryan's fiancé just a few weeks after Ryan died. She asked him if he knew Ryan had died. He nonchalantly replied yes. Again, did he care? Absolutely not. He had made his money and that was all that mattered.

Yes, the drug user does choose to use the drugs. How can any of us judge the reasons people choose to do drugs? We don't know the pains they have dealt with in their lives. From my experience they are people that have underlying emotional issues, children that were taught by example that it was a way of life, people who are hurting. Addiction is so strong. It is a disease that I don't think people want to have. They are in chains and are slaves to the drugs and it is so easily accessible, which just makes it harder to kick. I see young people on the street, I can see the pain in their eyes, their disappointment in where they are in their life. I wish I had the answers. I wish I could heal them all. It reminds me of a saying I recently saw: "To you they may be a homeless drug addict, but for some he is a beloved son they couldn't help."

When I used to listen to people talk about a loved one that they lost, and how they thought of them everyday, I always thought that possibly they were just using the term "everyday" loosely. I was incorrect. I live with the death of my son everyday. Yet the person that sold him the illegal drugs is still going on with his life with no regrets. To this day I am sure he is still out there selling his drugs with no worries, no responsibilities, no pain.

After Ryan died, I was asked to speak at a Narcotics-Anonymous meeting about the need for tough love. I respectfully declined. Right or wrong, tough love was something I was never able to do. I could never shut the door on my son who so emotionally needed me. But on April 17, 2006 I closed the door on his coffin forever. I watched as his little brother threw himself across the coffin after everyone had left and cry uncontrollably. I closed the door on the man he could have still been, the father he might have been and the son he will always be in my heart.

Now all I have are memories, a curio cabinet and about ten video tapes of his life that I have yet to watch. I have two tattoos in his remembrance and a spinning ring with his name engraved that I spin when I am thinking of him. I follow some of his friends on face book, watch as they grow into young adults, raise their children, live life. Ryan's little brother is now an adult and a wonderful dad to a son named Ryan. I pray he is never a victim of addiction.

Yes, my son was a drug addict and he died from that addiction. But the same result can happen to the person that makes the mistake to not say no and try drugs for the first time. We can't save the world. But what we can do is judge the criminals and punish them appropriately for the son, daughter, nephew, niece, granddaughter, grandson, friend that they took because they chose to sell illegal drugs with no regard for human life.

I hope I have made my point. I know it jumps around, just as my thoughts do. Writing this has definitely brought all the pain to the forefront again. But I am doing it in remembrance of my son, Ryan Lee Cox. When you ponder my story, and when you go home to your family and hug

them, remember I don't have that choice...all I can do is look at pictures and spin my ring. You have the choice to try to make a difference by enacting House Bill 2044 and making stronger punishments for the drug dealers that have no regard for anyone's lives but their own.