

Unfinished business in Salem that could save lives (Guest opinion)

BY GUEST COLUMNIST

By Kerry Strickland, Jackie Jones and Julia Pinsky

6/29/17
From the desk
of Sheri Matshon
Sheri Matshon

The Oregonian

The phone rings. The news shatters. Our loss unimaginable. Each of us has lived a moment that no mother should ever live: the moment we discovered that our child is gone, the latest overdose victim in the epidemic of opioid painkillers sweeping the nation.

Jordan who loved baseball. Max, a poet and chef. Jim, also a chef who was always on his skateboard.

We now wonder what could have been different -- how chronic addiction could have been avoided or beaten. But one thing is certain. Our children did not have to die.

And one more thing we know as the mothers of Jordan, Max and Jim: The Oregon Legislature can and must take action to help prevent other families from being devastated by opioid addiction.

There are two bills pending in the legislature that could have a huge impact. They are bills that could prevent addiction and overdose, and spare thousands of families the pain of shattered dreams of their children.

House Bill 2645 would set up a system for disposal of unused prescription painkillers, the pills in our medicine cabinets, leftover from that shoulder or knee surgery. These leftover pills pose a huge risk, as more than 75 percent of the people who become addicted to prescription painkillers *started out of a medicine cabinet*. This bill would require pharmaceutical companies to help pay for disposal boxes in places like drugstores so it's as easy to get rid of leftover pills as it is to get the pills in the first place.

A second bill, House Bill 2518, would help make sure that doctors aren't prescribing painkillers in a dangerous way likely to lead to addiction. Just 20 percent of the doctors, nurses and dentists in Oregon prescribe 78 percent of the opioid painkillers. HB 2518 would set up a review team to help educate prescribers who are handing out more painkillers than recommended by the Centers for Disease Control. The practice of overprescribing pain pills has created a pipeline for addiction, both to pain pills and heroin. This bill would help prescribers get it right and limit the risk of addiction.

Despite widespread support from legislators across the state, both of these bills are stuck in committee for reasons we don't understand. There are powerful forces at work here as the pharmaceutical companies that make painkillers are working to protect their clients' pocketbooks. We aren't lobbyists. We don't have political action committees. And we don't spend much time in Salem.

But we do know these common sense bills could save lives and protect families if enacted.

Jordan was 24 years old when he died, after a sports injury led to prescription painkillers and then, seven years of fighting heroin addiction. Max was 25 and was exposed to opioids after being injured in car accident. Jim died at 18 after taking a fatal mixture of prescription drugs. Two days later, his family opened a letter from the Arts Institute Culinary School accepting Jim to pursue a dream that was now gone.

It's too late for our sons. We can't bring them back, but it's not too late for other children. It's not too late to spare other families from the life-shattering loss and grief.

As moms who have lost our children, we call on legislators to ignore the power politics of interest groups, and take real action to address the opioid crisis. Don't spike these bills in the shadows, bring them to a vote. Protect our families. Protect our children. And in honor of Jordan, Max and Jim - and the hundreds of others who die from opioid overdose each year in Oregon - we call on you to pass HB2645 and HB2518 into law.

Kerry Strickland Jordan's mom, and founder of JordansHope.org. Julia Pinsky is Max's mom, who launched MaxsMission.org. Jackie Jones is Jim's mom, and an activist to prevent prescription drug abuse.