

My name is Derek Nelson. I am 35 years old and I am a wildland firefighter from Josephine County. Shortly after I turned 21, I met my friend Meredith. It didn't take long for our friendship to develop into something more closely resembling family. There were many, many times when we drove each other nuts. At no point could one of us have an awkward or embarrassing moment without some kind of sarcastic comment from the other, but in spite of, or maybe because of this type dynamic we were always there for each other. We helped each other move and spent the holidays together. If for some reason my mom could not get a hold of me, she would call Meredith. I never had a sister, but I had Meredith, and for that I am extremely grateful.

As long as I knew her, Meredith struggled with her mental health. She suffered from depression and PTSD. Instead of viewing these conditions as a handicap, she used them as a tool to help empathize with others in pain.

About two and a half years ago things took a turn for the worse. Unbeknownst to most of her friends and family she began self medicating. This led her to being hospitalized after an overdose of opiates. After a shot or two of narcan, she left the hospital. She did the best she could to find treatment on her own. What she found was a series of waitlists and dead ends.

Three months later on April 21 of 2019 she died alone in a dingy motel room just days away from having a bed at an in-patient rehab facility. She would still be here if treatment were easier to come by. When I ended up in the ER with a broken collarbone after crashing my mountain bike, I was treated with compassion and respect. I left the hospital with appointments to promptly see specialists and surgeons. The hospital even offered to help me with transportation to and from appointments. In short the people at hospital made it hard to not get the care I needed.

Careening down a mountain on a bicycle at 30 mph is an objectively reckless thing to do. However at no point did anyone give me the impression that this made me somehow less deserving of care. Meredith, like many others struggling with substance abuse disorder, did not have the same experience. Because of the stigma associated with substance abuse people like Meredith are treated as if they are somehow less deserving. I firmly believe that if she had access to treatment, she would still be here. Two out of three of us know someone impacted by substance abuse disorder. Overdose deaths were up 70% between spring of 2019 and spring of 2020. I implore you to take immediate action on this bill. It could make the difference between seeing a loved one at the next holiday and wondering what might have been.