

Hello Chair Dembrow, Vice Chair Webber, members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Jon Epstein. My wife Jennifer and I have lived and raised our family in Portland for 30 years. In support of SB238, we come to tell you the story of what happened to us and what we've since learned.

On a fateful night in December 2020, our vibrant bright and healthy 18-year-old son Cal went online seeking information. Cal was home from his first semester of college where he was successfully building his new life as an independent young adult. Cal googled "What is Oxycontin?" He researched what it is and looks like, what was a safe dose for his weight and how it might interact with his anxiety medicine. Perhaps Cal wanted to self-medicate the anxiety he was seeing a therapist for. Or maybe he was just experimenting and looking to have a little fun he may have heard about.

After his research, Cal went on social media where, for a few bucks, he quickly & easily bought what he was told and believed was pharmaceutical Oxycontin; however the pills he got that looked in every way like legitimate medicine were actually packed full of illicit fentanyl, 50x more powerful than heroin. Cal never stood a chance. We continue to grieve his loss as powerfully as we love him.

To be clear: this was not a good choice. We know that, and he must have known that; after all we had discussed the risks of drugs, as we knew them, regularly throughout adolescence with both of our boys. But what Cal and we didn't know about was the existence of a new threat, hidden and instantly lethal, where one's first experimentation could be their last.

We came to discover that Cal was one of thousands of young people nationally affected by this then-unknown risk. We also now know that Oregon youth have been disproportionately impacted. In 2021, nearly 100 teens & young adults in our state have died drug-induced deaths, 80% involving fentanyl. These deaths have grown faster recently than that of any other age group in Oregon...and involve fentanyl more. The subset of 30 or so Oregon teenagers that died in 2021 represent an outrageous 7X increase from just a few years prior; that's the fastest growth of deaths for teens in the entire United States. To put that in perspective, in 2018 the drug death rate for Oregon teens was ranked 43rd in the country; now we're ranked 11th, just behind West Virginia.

Youth, and teens in particular, are a relatively small subset of all those we've sadly lost to overdose & poisoning. As a result of being such a small set of victims, mitigations to avoid these deaths are often rolled into solutions for older, more resolute users...who often suffer substance use disorder. That's immensely important work. But kids like Cal, who was not experiencing dependency or addiction, suffered from the risk factor of an inaccurate perception of harm. There's no way to say for sure if we and Cal's health teachers had known and discussed this, if things would have turned out differently. We think so.

But one thing we are sure of is that with the passage of SB238, knowledge will become a protective factor; with an accurate perception of harm about today's drug landscape and deception, not all, but many, kids will make different choices...and go on to experience the rich fabric of a full life that Cal never will.

Drug policy is immensely complex. The issue of not even knowing is not.

Jon Epstein