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Tahira Malik: Helping Drug Addicts to Recover

BY TOM JENZ MAY 09, 2023 1:08 P.M.



PHOTO BY TOM JENZ



Tahira Malik

In Milwaukee County, drug overdose deaths for 2023 have now exceeded 200 (including pending results), according to the medical examiner. Those deaths put the county on pace to exceed drug deaths in previous years, 644 in 2021 and 673 in 2022 (pending toxicology results).

Why is this happening? Who makes and sells the dangerous drugs?

John McGarry, assistant special agent heading the Milwaukee District Office for the DEA, said the deadly drugs are produced illicitly in Mexico by various Mexican cartels with chemicals sourced from China. Forty percent of substances confiscated by the DEA contain a lethal dose of fentanyl and are often sold in the U.S. as versions of different pills like cocaine.

If you are a drug user, how do you get help with this life-threatening nightmare? I checked with the Milwaukee Health Department, and one name kept surfacing, Tahira Malik, founder and director of Samad's House. Her mission is to save drug addicts who have overdosed and to help addicts through the recovery process. She told me, "If you've ever lived in addiction, you lose all sense of self. You lose who you are. You lose all of your values and integrity." Malik would know. She was a dedicated drug addict for 15 years before her recovery. She has been drug-free for 11 years.

We met at a coffee shop on Capitol Drive, sitting across from one another. Through steady eye contact,

Malik hit me with her honesty. She told me her life story including the unpleasant details. It's been a journey through sunny hills and deep dark valleys.

Let's start out with your origins, where you grew up, your neighborhood and community, and the schools you attended.

I was born and raised in a neighborhood located in the zip code 53206. I was raised in the Islam faith. From kindergarten through 5th grade, I went to a Muslim school, which was very structured, boys on one side, girls on the other. From sixth grade on, I attended Milwaukee Public Schools—a real culture shock. At Christmas time, kids would ask me what gifts I got for Christmas. I had to lie because I didn't want to be excluded.

How about your family? Who were your parents? What were their jobs?

My mother and father have been married for 54 years. They are both 72. My mom was a homemaker and later a special education teacher, and my dad was a Milwaukee public school teacher. Whenever my mom went out of our house, she fully covered herself as in the Muslim woman tradition. For the first two years of high school, I attended a public school, Riverside University. My father didn't like that I was struggling for a sense of belonging and skipping classes and he had me transferred to St Joan Antida, Catholic all-girls high school. I excelled there: drama club, debate, forensics, honor roll and was elected senior class president.

After high school, you stayed in the all-girls environment, attending Alverno College.

True, but I partied on weekends with my UW-Whitewater friends. In 1997, I graduated from Alverno College with a degree in social sciences, psychology and professional communications. My first job was for the YWCA in the Wisconsin Works program started by Governor Tommy Thompson. Any women getting welfare money had to go to work in order for their benefits to continue. I was only 23 and was teaching older women how to prepare for the world of work—interview skills, desk job preparedness and motivational skills.

How long did you hold that teaching job at the YWCA?

Not long. I liked working with children, and I got a job at the YMCA where I stayed for five years. I became a counselor in the Sponsor Scholar program. I helped students from grades 9 to 12 prepare for college through the mentorship program. For example, if a student wanted to be a journalist, we would find a working journalist mentor for the student.

Along the way, you began to encounter difficulties in your personal life.

At 24, I got pregnant and had a daughter. Two months after giving birth, I had gallbladder surgery. Five days later, I got in a car accident. I was rear ended, and afterward, I suffered chronic pain. My doctor prescribed prescription pain pills, and I became addicted to opioids. All the way through high school

and college, I had taught and practiced good health issues, health and wellness, how to prevent pregnancy, how to avoid drug use, “Just say No to Drugs.” Then, things changed.

I guess you could say your downward slide began. Tell me how the drug addiction affected your everyday life.

I still had my job, but eventually I quit and started another teaching job. The downward spiral began because in order to go to work I had to take pills to reduce my pain. I began buying street drugs, opioids and cocaine. The addiction got worse. I was hooked. Over the next 15 years, I lost my house, lost my car, and lost my love relationship. I moved back in with my parents and became a dependent drug addict. I was digging myself into a hole. To pay for street drugs, I committed a crime to support my drug habit. Eventually, the police arrested me.

You hit rock bottom and went to jail and to the House of Correction. I believe you were incarcerated for 13 months. What was that like?

For the first 12 days, I was horribly sick. Could not eat or sleep. Suffered a lot of terrible pain. But eventually I met many women like myself—drug addicts who had ruined their lives.

What a tragedy. You were very smart and had been successful. College grad. Loving family. Marriage. You were a good mother to your children. And yet you ended up in jail.

Yes, and my family was supporting me. But at the House of Correction, we women inmates came together and encouraged each other. Gained weight, got fit, ate well, and started caring about how we looked. Many of these women were creative and ambitious. Every day I was rebuilding myself as a person, my body, my spiritual health. I got out of jail after 13 months. By then, I had three children, and I needed to get a job. I was receiving welfare, and I rented a house. I took an entry level job for \$7.25 an hour. I began to rebuild myself. Then I got a job at the Brady Corporation and made good money. I worked there for ten years. I was doing well, but during that time, I lost my uncle, my cousin and my very best friend, all to drug overdoses. These deaths hit me hard. But I guess that motivated me to start Samad's House.

Samad's House helps women drug addicts get better. When did you get that started?

Started it in 2018. Samad's House is a sober-living place for women in drug addiction recovery. They share the kitchen, living room, sitting room and bathrooms. We recently opened a second house for women with children. Before coming to us, these women recover in residential housing for 30 to 60 days. We have structured living, a set schedule for all your waking hours. That includes Narcotics Anonymous meetings, education classes, nursing programs, and trades courses at MATC. We also have a mentorship program, recovered addicts helping the women. The women are with us for 120 days. You need to have viable income and somewhere to live

when you get out. After they leave our two houses, we have different checkpoints to keep track of how the women are doing.

Here are some statistics for Milwaukee County: The Medical Examiner reported 41 probable drug deaths through April 16th, and seventeen overdose deaths came within the first four days of April. Why do you think this is happening?

Drug deaths are often caused by fentanyl laced into the cocaine. Fentanyl is 50 times more potent than cocaine. A grain of that drug will kill you. Cocaine is an upper. Opiates are a downer. Drug dealers lace cocaine with fentanyl because it's synthetic and it's cheaper. The addict may not even know about fentanyl. A high percentage of street cocaine is now laced with fentanyl.

Currently, there are treatments that can help a drug user overcome drug overdoses. For instance, Narcan nasal spray and fentanyl test strips. In 2022, the Milwaukee Health Department distributed 1,546 Narcan kits and 10,954 fentanyl test strips to the community. What exactly is a Narcan kit? A fentanyl test strip?

Narcan is a nasal spray that reverses the effect of a drug overdose. If you find someone overdosing, you administer Narcan, and you will get a heartbeat back. At Samad's House, we teach how to use a fentanyl testing strip for its presence in cocaine. We are becoming a harm reduction agency. We feel it is our duty to save lives of drug abuse victims. We train people on what the signs of a drug overdose look like.

You actually hand out these free Narcan kits and test strips, no questions asked.

We call them our FACTS Paks, acronym for Fentanyl-Accidents-Continue-To-Soar. We send out our paid ambassadors to educate people and groups in Milwaukee. We are mainly targeting the inner city where most drug overdoses and deaths occur. We train people with opioid addictions how to use fentanyl test strips and Narcan nasal spray. We even knock on doors of houses. Last fall, we parked our cars on a neighborhood street, opened our trunks, and distributed Narcan kits and fentanyl strips. We have placed Narcan kits and fentanyl strips in boxes in four businesses in the inner city. Anyone has access to those life-saving products.

The Milwaukee Health Department thinks there is an overdose epidemic in the county. How can the ordinary citizen help?

I was driving up 35th Street with my Samad's House Ambassadors last week. Near the 35th and Vliet Street crosswalk, a man was lying in the street, a few people surrounding him so cars wouldn't run him over. I knew he had overdosed. I was bogarted in our car, couldn't get out, but I told one of the people, "Take this Narcan and spray it up his nose," but the gentleman was afraid to do that. Fortunately, the rescue squad arrived and used the Narcan to save the gentleman's life. This is an example of how the ordinary citizen could learn how to use Narcan to save lives. Opioid overdose can affect everyone, so everyone needs to step up to learn, be aware, have

resources and tools to stop an overdose, and know where to go to get those tools and trainings.

Have you heard of this drug? It's called xylazine, which goes by the street names "tranq," "tranq dope" and "zombie drug." It extends the effects of fentanyl and mimics the highs of heroin.

Xylazine is a very new drug that drug dealers are mixing with fentanyl. It's actually a horse tranquilizer. Yet another challenge to overcome.

You have a philosophy on how to help drug addict victims recover.

Our Samad's House ambassadors have all personally experienced the perils of drug addiction and how to rebuild our lives after addiction. We have lived the true-life experience. When a woman comes to Samad's House, we give her the passion and love she needs. We take that holistic approach to rebuilding her life.

You don't seem to ever judge the drug addict.

How can I judge someone that I have been?

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