Welcome back. This is Jen Lee, the creator, and hosts of I Need Blue. **www.ineedblue.net**

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Deborah Mayer is a wife and mom. She tragically lost her only son Shaun to the disease of addiction. In honor of him, she spends her time creating awareness about the addiction epidemic, while truly focusing on helping others like her son and their families. She is here to share her memories of Shaun, his struggles which led to his opioid and eventual heroin addiction, which ultimately took his life.

Deborah is an advocate, a strong and powerful voice, who shared her testimony in front of legislators to create change. Deborah, like many families couldn't fathom ever having to deal with this.

During 2020 over 100,000 people in the US died from an overdose. Synthetic opioids including fentanyl are now the most common drugs involved in overdose deaths.

Deborah

My son Shaun grew up in Merritt Island with his two sisters. He grew up in a normal household with a father and mom. He loved baseball and my husband was the coach. I was a cheerleader on the side cheering him on. He was a good kid and was never in trouble. He was happy and a little bit of a jokester. Very smart. He loved animals very, very much. Shaun didn’t have any childhood trauma. He got into music and played the guitar in a band. He was well-rounded with music, sports, and the family. He earned a Bright Future scholarship in engineering. In college is when things started to go downhill for Shaun. He was taking opioids and when the opioids weren't available, the heroin came in which began a new nightmare really began.

## During this time, we are going through a crisis in our home as well. Before we knew Shaun was addicted to opioids, my husband had lymphoma, stage 3, and our daughter, who was 13 at the time, ended up with a very rare blood disease called HL H. She had a slim chance of survival. She’s over at Orlando Health Arnold Palmer Hospital for Children Specialty Practice getting chemo and heavy doses of steroids, at the same time my husband went through chemo. Shaun was home taking care of the dogs. My daughter and my husband, both survived.

## It was during this time, we learned about his addiction. We tried to get him help. It was a hard time, a bad rollercoaster ride.

## Jen

## I'm taking all this in. Your husband is diagnosed with stage 3 lymphoma. Your teenage daughter is diagnosed with a rare disease. Your husband and your daughter are getting chemo at the same time. Unbeknownst to you, your son is going through an addiction issue. Let's talk about you for a second. How did you manage that?

## Deborah

## I don't think you realize how strong you are until it's the only option you have. Rachel's disease, she had a less than 15% chance of survival and there was only 100 cases/year worldwide of this rare disease. There was a protocol. It was rough seeing her going through that. We almost forgot my husband had lymphoma because when your child is sick that is what you concentrate on. He would go home to have his chemo treatments and then return to Palmer hospital. We were staying in Ronald McDonald House. This lasted for 1 and a half months. We stayed with her. When my husband was at home getting chemo, I stayed with my daughter. It was a nightmare, but we got through it and they both survived. My daughter graduated UCF. She’s 25 and in Kansas City.

## Deborah

## After that month and a half, we came home, and I realized I was missing jewelry. That's how I found out it was my son. We cried while he told me what was going on and was sorry. We told him we would get him help. It was devastating, but we are going to get him help. We got him into a rehab. It was a month-long rehab and he needed longer than that, but he didn't want to do longer. He thought he was ok. But he wasn’t and he got back into it.

## Jen

## Where did he get the drugs?

## Deborah

## He started with opioid pills. Shaun told me he ended up getting them from a guy he knew that worked for FedEx. The driver knew what was in the boxes which were being sent to the pharmacies. He sold them. How long he got away with it? I don't know.

## It was during the time opioid addiction was being highlighted. It was getting hard to get the pills from a doctor. Many doctors stopped prescribing it. This was before Florida started cracking down. Then he started heroin. I was shocked heroin was even in our community.

We went through many dark times, and **it** was devastating to see this person who is your child, not be the same person anymore. He was such a kind kid, everyone loved him, and he turned into this irritable person who I was scared to be around at times later in his addiction.

He moved out and it got worse. His addiction lasted about 10 years until we lost him.

Jen

The moment Shaun said to you, “I have an addiction” is a moment which many families won’t forget. Can you describe how you reacted?

Deborah

I cried. He cried. We all cried. We had a family intervention trying to understand it. Like, how did it get this bad? How did it get this? How did they get there? But I thought ok, we will get him help and everything’s going to be fine. You know, we'll just go get him help. But it doesn't always work out that way; a lot of times it doesn’t work out that way.

It depends on the person, how diseased their brain gets from the addiction, and whether they're going to be able to fight this or not. I think we have very little options out there getting someone help. We had many conversations with him as he was going thru this opioid addiction and he says, “Mom, it's not your fault.” I said, “Did something happen to you in your childhood as you were growing up and we don't know about it? Did we do anything?” He said, “No, I had anxiety. And I said, “why didn’t you tell us you have anxiety?” I didn’t see anxiety in my son, he didn’t appear to have anxiety. He was happy kid. He had friends. “I had anxiety, but I didn't know what it was.”

He did self-medicate the last 6 months of his senior year while in high school with Adderall. He was self-medicating for a mental illness which we didn't even know about. In high school, it can be like, “hey, try this.” Then they try it and, “Oh, wow. I feel so good. I feel so much better.” Sometimes they try drugs as a way of fitting in and some end up addicted. Some can walk away, and others can’t. He couldn't get away from it. He said he couldn't live without it.

It got so bad, we sent him to Washington State to be with his dad, my ex-husband. He had gotten a good job out there. I had no idea how bad Washington State was. It is where he started heroin.

We flew out there four or five times in which three visits he was in the hospital. He had sepsis and endocarditis of the heart. Just because you do heroin, or fentanyl, etc. it doesn’t mean the only means of death is an overdose. The addiction creates havoc on your body, you could die of a heart problem, a kidney problem, etc. The coroner's report said he had endocarditis, hepatitis C, kidney disease. He was a very sick man at 33 and he could have died from any of those. We went out there and tried to save him many, many times. I don't think many people know what to do with the heroin addiction.

Jen

What was it like, as a parent, having your child so far away knowing he's dealing with this addiction? And what was your first visit like to Washington State?

Deborah

When we sent him out there, we thought, ok he is away and out of this environment and away from the people who were a bad influence on him. Don’t ever think that as a parent. It is not the answer because drugs are everywhere. Everywhere. Washington State is a mess, more than other places.

How did I feel? You know what, at first, I felt relieved because I lived in the nightmare when he was here. Going and picking him up in the middle of the night. It was a roller coaster ride. Just seeing it face on, seeing the addiction and the ugliness it all entails. I was watching it and I was almost relieved he left. That doesn't mean I didn't love my son. I felt hopefully what my son needed was to get away and I felt a glimmer of hope.

I needed to have a breath. I hadn't had a breath in a while. I couldn't sleep. I hadn't had a night's sleep. It rapidly changed as my ex-husband would call. Eventually he kicked him out.

The first visit to Washington State was hard because our son who loved baseball, loved his stepdad, loved his sisters, attended college on an engineering scholarship, was sitting on a step in a very bad area of Washington State. The cops told us don't go down there. It's dangerous. We drove by and he spotted us. He didn't know we were coming. I couldn't get a hold of him prior because when you're an addict and being homeless, they share a cell phone. Many times, the cell phone gets stolen, so you end up without one until someone gets a new one, they are willing to share.

 He ended up meeting us and we ended up taking him out to a nice dinner. It was hard because I knew when we walked into that nice restaurant people would stare. I wanted to get my son a nice meal because I’m sure he hadn’t had one in a while. He's very thin and hollow looking. He could hardly eat. I didn't want to take him back. I begged him to come back with us.

He said, “No. Mom, please don't ever come back here again. It's dangerous.” I wanted to kidnap him. Honestly, we wanted to kidnap him; put him in the car, lock the car doors, and put him on a plane back home. You can't do that. It was hard.

Deborah

When they're using heroin, you are using needles. Sometimes they're using dirty needles because that's all they can find. He had developed very bad sores on his leg. The reality is when they shoot up, they must go to different veins because their veins eventually collapse. Sometimes they go to their legs or groin, wherever. This is how desperate they are.

My son developed sepsis. He was very sick. When my husband and I went out there we told the doctors he is a heroin addict, and he cannot have anything for pain. They'd been given him morphine. He left the hospital earlier than he was supposed to because he needed his fix. We went back home and of course he didn't want to come with us. This experience happened a couple times. One time his baby sister came out there not knowing it was the last time they would see each other.

He said to us, “Why did you let anybody up here? Why did you come? I don't want you to see me like this.” He knew how heartbreaking it was for us to see him knowing he couldn’t get out of the grips of it. That was hard. People don’t understand. When addiction takes grip, no matter how much love them or how much you do for your child, no amount of love is gonna help.

Jen

We want to believe love will prevail.

Deborah

Many people blame the parents. They didn’t do the right things. They aren’t good parents. They must have done something to their kids. The truth is, they weren't bad parents. It’s a horrible thing and it’s happening to me and happening more than ever. You know, 100,000 people overdose last year.

Jen

People want to think it won't happen to them. It's not in the schools. It's not in their community. It's not next door. It's not in their son or daughter's pocket right now. But the reality is it is, and our children are dying. That's reality.

Deborah

I must admit Shaun got bad towards the end. My hope was diminishing as I saw him suffering. There were times that I felt if God would take him, he would not be suffering. But I still had that glimmer of hope, enough to keep me going. The child I saw was not my son. He pushed us away in the end and said a couple of hurtful things. I think Shaun was trying to save us from not seeing what it was doing to him because he knew it would hurt us so bad. He never wanted us to see him like that, so he pushed us away.

I never put him down. I never called him names. I never told him he was terrible. I just kept trying to find those magic words. Those magic words that I'm going to say to him and it's going to click. I researched constantly. I would talk to people who were addicts and recovered. I like to use the word “recovery”. I don't like to use the word “clean”. I think we need to change some language on addiction. “Clean” means you're dirty so I always say “recovery”. I knew from my research he was suffering.

 I never took anything personal. There were some ugly moments where he said things. That’s what drugs do to you, and it was his way of pushing us away. I told myself, “That’s the drugs. It's not Shaun.” You do so much research, Jen, I think I knew more than the doctor.

Jen

They say knowledge is power. Your situation, trying to understand everything like, how did we get here? How do I help him? Anytime you read something, it probably gave you a little bit of hope, because maybe it was a new idea. Maybe it was a new approach, a new way of looking at it, and you're like, “Okay, I never thought of that. Let me try that.” Maybe that helped to maintain your hope.

Deborah

I would tell Shaun these things. I would text him and sometimes I would never get a text back, but I kept texting. I kept sending him information, articles thinking he's going to read it. There was a medication you could take but it was very expensive; they would stay on it for a little while to eliminate/lessen the cravings. It worked for some, and it didn't work for others. Suboxone contains a combination of buprenorphine and naloxone. [Buprenorphine](https://www.drugs.com/monograph/buprenorphine.html) is an opioid medication, sometimes called a narcotic. [Naloxone](https://www.drugs.com/monograph/naloxone.html) blocks the effects of opioid medication, including pain relief or feelings of well-being that can lead to opioid abuse. Suboxone is used to treat [narcotic (opiate) addiction](https://www.drugs.com/cg/opioid-dependence.html). Suboxone is not for use as a pain medication.

He ended up selling it to get what he wanted. Therapy didn't work. There are some people who have suffered addiction and one day they wake up and said, “enough's enough.” Nobody wants to live that life of being homeless. The things my son saw, I think the trauma that he saw on the streets, made it harder for him. When he passed and I put information on FB, people from Washington State reached out to me to say what a wonderful person he was. Even through his dark days, the girls would say that Shaun, while on the streets, would make sure they wouldn't get hurt. He would protect them. Deep down, his upbringing was still with him. We met a girl he was dating when we were out there. She met us. She told us what a wonderful person he was, and all the good things he did for people out there.

Shaun was getting very depressed and then he overdosed. We got the call. You know, we're all preparing ourselves for this. But really, you're not prepared. I was watching my two grandkids when my daughter and her husband went away for his birthday for the weekend. When I got the call, it said “Washington”. I was so excited. Shaun’s calling! But it wasn't, and I fell apart. Luckily my daughter was home from college, and she took the two girls. My daughter called my husband, and he came home. I was in the closet just bawling my head off when he arrived. It was a nightmare which came true that I had prayed it wouldn’t. I lost my son, my child, my own son, and it was devastating. We tried so hard to save him. Many trips out there to try to save him.

This is the worst nightmare parents can go through. What's sad is it's happening to too many of us. This shouldn't be happening. I will grieve the rest of my life, until I take my last breath. To live for him, so his life and journey weren’t in vain, I started a **FB group called MOM-anon.**

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/381395149203871>

MOM-anon is a trademarked fellowship of mothers who will release themselves from the gripping clutches of their children who are addicted to drugs/alcohol; and the grieving mothers whose children have lost the battle of addiction.

Recitation of Services: Providing emotional and support services for moms; providing meetings with information in the field of self-help and personal empowerment subject matters to help MOMS regain control of their life; providing activities and events for moms to enjoy life.

MOM-anon was established in 2016 for mothers with addicted children (young or old) who are ready to take care of THEMSELVES! Free yourself from the gripping clutches of your addicted child. #youarenotalone " MOM is an Action Word"

MOM-anon is affiliated with Space Coast Recovery, Inc. Website: [spacecoastrecovery.com](https://l.facebook.com/l.php?u=http%3A%2F%2Fspacecoastrecovery.com%2F%3Ffbclid%3DIwAR3gynijBsxhA1orsu2fJkg7tF12WMJOGYQPpngTQok3D5s-kiROzhDMWbA&h=AT1xWwV3kBkDftG-jUFbnIY1o0XehLtXOXogciibflgnhfnuGsUnd61KwGIWxzvD7ypk4Wv2J9ZYEaIfoqIljxfXevVuvF68sLL-6r08XmzSyVRfebGk2BlXeugmGBgr7hndyhhzZEA1p6oQR9yqlvA)

It's for moms in Brevard County, we discuss on FB and we do meet. It’s a group of moms who either their children are in active addiction, and they don't know what to do, because you go through such a roller coaster ride with not knowing when that day will come you get a phone call or for moms, such as myself, who have lost their children.

Jen

Space Coast Recovery will be a part of my next episode on March 28th.

Deborah

Yes, and many who recover, end up using their experience and their recovery to help others. They’re the best ones because they understand what that person's going through more than anybody. They lived it.

I had written to Lauren Davis, she is a state legislator in Washington State. She had started what's called Ricky’s Law. No matter what I did, I could not mandate my son into rehab, even when he had been in jail for stealing something out of a store over there. I wrote the judge, we all did, my whole family, “please, mandate him to spend time in rehab because he's not going to get the help in jail.”He wasn't in very long. 30 days and they let him out. Why? They let him out because he had hepatitis C, and they cannot have people that are sick in jail.

I wrote to Lauren, and she said Ricky's Law was not in effect. Ricky's law says, as a family, a parent or a loved one, you can mandate 30 days of rehab, where they will come pick your loved one up in an ambulance, and they have no choice. They're stripped of their rights; they can’t deny not going. There are criteria based upon how sick they are, and Shaun met all of it. They would go to a rehab for 30 days and after that they would be given the opportunity to continue.

She says the law has not come into effect yet. It did, eventually, but it failed Shaun. Shaun lived in King County and they did not have enough funding for the ambulance service. When I begged them to please pick him up, they said they wouldn’t because they were not participating in this new law, Ricky's law in Washington State because of funding. They failed him. Lauren Davis posted something on Facebook. I reached out and told her what happened to Shaun. She posted my letter that I wrote her. She asked me to come out and tell Shaun’s story to state legislators as they are trying to get more money put into the program to fix it.

They were required to be picked up by an ambulance. It was part of Ricky’s law, and they needed the funding for the ambulatory system. So, I went and spoke to the state legislators, and it was unanimously passed based on his story, the governor signed it, and $55 million was put into Ricky's law in honor Shaun. I would love a law like that in Florida. Shaun’s only been gone three years and one day when I have the strength, I will pursue it. Grief takes a lot out of you. Maybe we can make it Shaun’s law here in Florida.

Jen

Congratulations! It takes on person to get the ball rolling. I hope the day will come when we have Shaun’s law in FL too.

How did you help your daughters through this?

Deborah

I have an older one who is married with two children, and it affected her a lot. It affected her a lot. She’s got anxiety and depression that she deals with herself from the trauma when she was in the hospital. Imagine a 13-year-old girl, beautiful blonde hair, happy, hanging with friends and she wakes up one day and she's in the hospital, she's lost all her hair, and she's very sick. When she started her freshman year of high school in a wig. People picked on her. She got bullied and made fun. They pulled her wig. It was traumatic for her and then to have her brother pass away. She texted me the other night and said, “I'm having a hard time. I'm thinking about my brother right now.” Yes, it affects her.

My other daughter is affected too, but she's got a husband, two little girls and works full-time. Yes, it has affected all of us and it still affects me, but I try to do good for people like my son and mothers who are suffering because I had nothing, and nobody understood in my family.

I think a mother takes the hit the most. I know fathers do too. I’m finally out of the fog of losing my child. I'm saying there's a fog. There's a fog for the first several years. But I have a lot of work to do.

Jen

You shared something amazing with me. And it has to do with backpacks that you carry around in your car. Can you share that with us?

Deborah

I fill backpacks for women and men. For example, for women, I put feminine products, toothbrush, toothpaste, washcloth, etc in this bag. I include information on where to get help and a little note telling them that they were worth it. I do the pretty color backpacks for the girls and the boy backpacks for the boys. The night before Christmas Eve, we went to spend the evening at my sister in law's house. On the way back, there was three guys on the side of the road by the church here in Merritt Island Baptist Church. I pulled in and they're all standing out there. They were homeless and drug addicts. I told them about my son, and we talked for half an hour, my husband and I and them.

They really wanted to get help Jen, “we want to get help” they said. “We want to get help. I need a sponsor.” I think they felt good because I treated him like a normal person. I didn't call them names, but I sat there, and I told my son’s story. I let them know, I understood. I think the stigma, the embarrassment, stops people from getting help. I tell them in that backpack are ways to get help, who to call, and where to go. I told him about Space Coast Recovery as well. I don't know if any of those guys went to Space Coast Recovery or called any of those numbers, but if just one person out of all the backpacks that I pass out throughout the year, one person gets help, that's great!

Jen

Are you in need of backpacks or supplies which you put in them?

Deborah

I get a lot of donations. Some mom’s buy McDonald gift cards so they can get some food. Every now and then when I need backpacks, they all come through. I found these backpacks on Amazon which aren’t very expensive. I have plenty right now and I have plenty of donations, but then I'm still filling more up. When the time comes, yes, I would love some. I take socks, snacks and toothbrush, toothpaste, and shampoos, etc..

Jen

I will put in the show notes the information on how to help you as well as your Mom-Anon information.

Deborah

And if anybody wants one of these backpacks or wants to keep some of them in their car, they can. If you see somebody on the side of the road or whatever, now you have something to give them. It gives them information on how and where to get help.

Jen

What is the greatest misconception when it comes to individuals who are dealing with addiction?

Deborah

That they're bad people. They're not, they're sick people who need help. They have a disease like any other disease. We don't understand how this disease affects society and affects families in a horrific way. It’s ugly. Other diseases, you're sick, you go to the hospital, you get well, or you get treatments or whatever. It's just so misunderstood. I'm going to let you know that I have met many, many people that are suffering addiction, whether they be on the streets, or the ones I've talked to at Space Coast Recovery. I will tell you every one of them I have met, has been gracious, kind. I think people who self-medicate, find the world is too cruel for them, like they have big hearts, and they cannot handle life. Life is too cruel for them. Does that make sense? They self-medicate. Many times, it comes from a mental illness. Whether it be depression, anxiety, etc they don't feel right in their own skin.

I would like people to understand what addiction is, and how it affects people. How their judgment and the stigma against it isn't helping people get help. Nor is it helpful to assume parents or families that have children who suffer addiction, there must be something wrong with the family. That’s so far from the truth. I want people to start writing their government, the state legislators. This must stop on the open border with bringing all this in. It must stop; young kids are dying from this stuff. We need to do something immediately because a lot of it's coming in through the borders. I’m really against the borders being open because I see more and more moms coming to me that join my group and their kid has died not just from heroine but fentanyl. Fentanyl, it'll kill you just like that.

Jen

What’s important for our community is to be aware. If you see something, say something. Do you think to fulfill your son's habit that he was also selling?

Deborah

Probably because there comes a time, they can't have a job. They can't hold a job down and they need their fix. I want to mention that I talked to my kids about drugs a lot. In fact, in elementary school, I was Just Say No To Drugs mom. It wasn't like I didn't talk to my kids about drugs or didn't warn them about drugs. I did all those things as a parent, and I would never have imagined my son in a million years this would have happened.

Jen

I want to thank Deborah for being my special guest today. All your information was inspiring helpful. I am sorry for the loss of your son Shaun, but what you are doing to bring awareness and help others especially with your backpack program, I think is amazing. Again, if you want to contribute and help the information will be in the show notes for this episode. This is Jen Lee, the creator and host of I Beed Blue. I can be found at [www.ineedblue.net](http://www.ineedblue.net) And remember you are stronger than you think!

FENTANYL AWARNESS BLOGS AND INFORMATION:

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