

# After son's death, author focuses on helping others

By Scott Shumaker

Vicky Harrison's children were raised in a normal, suburban middle-class home in Ohio. The schools were good, and the 58-year-old woman and her husband had steady jobs. The family attended church on Sundays.

Their oldest son, Tyler, had talent and ambition. Art teachers gushed over his drawings and paintings, and Tyler often charmed the people around him. He was in demand as a babysitter and received a promotion to cashier at his part-time job at a Kroger grocery store.

But trouble started when Tyler, who had struggled with depression and loneliness since adolescence, began experimenting with drugs the summer before his junior year of high school. First it was marijuana. Then one of Tyler's friends told Harrison that Tyler was using cocaine. Later in the school year, Tyler told his mother that he had used heroin. Tyler concealed his drug use, but repeated incidents contradicted his claims of sobriety: Tyler was fired from Kroger. He wrecked a car. During his junior year, he was caught

with cocaine in his English class.

A pattern of renewed hope followed by disappointment continued for years after Tyler graduated from high school. Then, one winter's day in 2014, Harrison found Tyler dead in his bedroom from a heroin overdose. He was 26 years old.

Harrison, a semi-retired school psychologist who moved to Goodyear two years ago, decided to chronicle the family's 10-year struggle with Tyler's drug use in book form. *Release Me* (xlibris.com, \$3.99 to \$19.99) tells the story of Tyler's life and death from his first battles with mental illness to the aftermath of his overdose death. *Release Me* provides an honest and unflinching look at a suburban, middle class boy's struggle with drugs and the toll it takes on his family. One purpose of the book, Harrison said, was to show readers that no neighborhood or social class is free from the dangers of addiction.

The book unfolds Tyler's decline through a chronological series of letters—both real and recreated—be-

tween Harrison and her son and weaves in scans of actual documents from the period covered. For example, Harrison includes the witness statement Tyler wrote when he was caught with sheets of counterfeit bills and marijuana at his high school. Other material blended with the text includes Tyler's artwork, notes to his mother, and letters of recommendation written by his high school teachers.

The book also engages the reader with Harrison's vivid first-hand accounts of Tyler's struggles with drugs. In one section, she describes her terror at returning home one day to find a beat-up car parked on her street and a suspicious man pounding on her door.

"I knew right away that this man was your drug dealer," she writes in one of *Release Me's* letters to Tyler. "The drug dealer that you've talked about numerous times with me. You even say that he's a bad man, and I just knew in my heart who it was before I even pulled into the driveway."

Besides dramatic moments like that, *Release Me* captures the smaller incidents surrounding Tyler's drug use that added up to an enormous burden over time. One of the brighter moments from Tyler's later years was finally getting his driver's license back. But while recounting the joy of this long-fought victory, *Release Me* is careful to show the reader the many small costs and inconveniences the family bore—such as the \$125 reinstatement fee—to gain this modest victory.

*Release Me* is a powerful read, but for Harrison it is just the beginning of her campaign to use Tyler's tragic death to save others from the same fate. Since publishing the book, Harrison has sought opportunities to share her story directly with the community as a public speaker. She gives regular talks at an addiction treatment center in Scottsdale.

Loree Adams, the clinical director at the center where Harrison speaks, said that Harrison's talk is a revelation for many of her patients because they don't



Goodyear resident Vicky Harrison chronicled her son's battle with drugs in her book *Release Me*. (Photo courtesy Vicky Harrison)

usually see addiction from the perspective of the family. Harrison's take on Tyler's battle speaks powerfully to the impact on the families of addicts.

"After she's there, there's a somber mood in the clinic," Adams said. "They have been attentive and at times there isn't a dry eye in the clinic."

Harrison's story, though sad, gives hope to those suffering from addiction.

"She's been able to give (patients) a sense of hope," Adams said, "that if they change, the love will return."

In her talks, Harrison also reminds addicts that it is not too late to change the ending of their own stories.

"I build my whole message around one word, and that is 'fight,'" Harrison said.

She is looking for more opportunities to share her family's story with audiences in the Valley. In her quest use Tyler's story to help others, Harrison met recently with the Governor's Office of Youth, Faith and Family, a state office participating in Arizona's efforts to curb opioid abuse.

When Harrison shares the stories from her book with patients in recovery, she said they often write her letters. In one letter, a patient said he was ready to leave rehab, but her talk persuaded him to stay.

"The letters have been very, very impacting," she said. When she reads them, "I feel like I do have a purpose." ■

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