

# 'At war': Families who lost children to overdose helping others

[Sean Bradley](#), **Livingston Daily** Published 7:30 a.m. ET Aug. 29, 2019

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Garrett Armstrong's life was saved on Aug. 2, 2018.

A heroin overdose nearly killed the 26-year-old from Hartland but a dose of the opioid overdose reversal drug Naloxone saved him.

Two days later, he wasn't so lucky.

He died of an overdose on Aug. 4 of that year, just before he was set to start a shift at his job at the USA2Go gas station in Hartland.



Hartland resident Kelly Armstrong holds up a photo of her son Garrett, who died last year of a heroin overdose. She will be participating in the fifth annual International Overdose Awareness Day event on Saturday in Fowlerville. (Photo: Sean Bradley - Livingston Daily Press And Argus)

"It was the fentanyl (in the heroin) that actually killed him," said Kelly Armstrong, Garrett's mother.

More than a year later, she's continuing to process her son's death. On Tuesday, she met Michele Wagner, founder of Mitchell's Hope, an organization that advocates for more and more accessible drug treatment and to help others learn about the signs of overdose and how to prevent it.

Wagner's son Mitchell died on Nov. 26, 2014, of a heroin overdose at the Fowlerville Wal-Mart.

[MORE: Local woman rallies for substance abuse change](#)

[MORE: Grieving mom shares story of her son's addiction](#)

"We advocate for changes in the laws," Wagner said. "We advocate for more treatment. We try to empower people to have their own voice."

For the fifth consecutive year, [Mitchell's Hope](#) will host an event for International Overdose Awareness Day, including a training on how to use Naloxone. The event, including a resource tent and candlelight vigil, takes place from 5:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. Saturday at the Fowlerville Mission House at 224 S. Church Street.



Michele Wagner, from Fowlerville, holds up pictures of her son Mitchell. He died of a heroin overdose in 2014. After his death, she started the organization Mitchell's Hope to help others with addiction. For the fifth consecutive year, she is hosting an event Saturday in Fowlerville for International Overdose Awareness Day. (Photo: Sean Bradley - Livingston Daily Press And Argus)

Training participants will also receive a Naloxone administration kit including a nasal injector of the drug, gloves and a face mask. However, supplies are limited.

"You have to know what an overdose looks like," Wagner said. "If I had known everything I know now, my son would be alive."

Signs of an overdose include lips turning blue, shallow or no breathing and hearing gurgling sounds coming from the victim, she said.

"I wanted to be able to give people the opportunity to save lives," Wagner said.

## 'Hey, try this'

Garrett was sober for approximately three months before his death, Armstrong said.

"He told me he's tried everything under the sun," she said. "His drug of choice was heroin."

Approximately four years before Garrett's death, a co-worker at a computer repair job introduced him to heroin, she said.

"It was like 'Hey, try this,'" Armstrong said. "Next thing you know, he was doing it just about every day. He just said it was the best high he's ever had, after trying everything else."

Garrett, a 2010 graduate of the Legacy Alternative High School in Hartland, was a "loving, compassionate person" who loved children, the family dogs and playing guitar, Armstrong said.

Although he admitted his problem, Garrett thought he could beat it on his own. He never attempted rehab, Armstrong said.

"A lot of his friends had died," she said. "He always said 'I know where my stuff comes from so nothing's going to happen to me.'"

The last time Armstrong spoke to her son was on the phone.

"He just told me he loved me and sorry he was a screw up," Armstrong said. "I told him he wasn't a screw up but the decisions he makes is what the screw up is."

After Garrett's death, Armstrong attended grief counseling for parents whose children died.

Later, she found [Mitchell's Hope on Facebook](#).

Armstrong wants to talk to Michele about her struggle in dealing with her son's death.

"Part of me is still in denial," Armstrong said. "I think he's going to call or walk through the door."

## 'At war'

Within the last year, there have been two fatal overdoses in Fowlerville, according to police chief John Tyler.

In 2017, 23 people died from opioid-related overdoses in Livingston County.

The county health department doesn't have data yet for 2018, according to Natasha Radke, health promotion coordinator at the county health department.

In 2018, there were 56 overdose investigations conducted by the Livingston County Sheriff's Office, [according to its annual report](#).

The 10 police agencies operating in the county conducted 124 overdose investigations, the report said.

Between 2006 and 2012, more than 33 million pain pills were sent to Livingston County of more than 3 billion in Michigan, according to data from the Washington Post.

Two CVS pharmacies in Howell distributed 5.7 million pills, while Fowlerville Pharmacy distributed 2.1 million pills.

**MORE:** [Just two Howell CVS pharmacies distributed nearly 6M pain pills between 2006 and 2012](#)

In Livingston County, Naloxone is available in pharmacies at Meijer, Kroger and Walgreens stores as well as at Community Mental Health Services of Livingston County. It can also be prescribed by a nurse practitioner at the Key Development Center in Brighton and is available for emergency purposes at the Brighton Center for Recovery.

But Wagner wants more to be done.

Wagner has contacted Botvin LifeSkills Training in an effort to have the program taught in elementary, middle school and high school classrooms in Livingston County.

The program is an evidence-based substance abuse and violence prevention program.

Studies testing the program's effectiveness have shown it can reduce the prevalence of tobacco, alcohol and illicit drug use by as much as 80% and reduce multiple drug use by up to 66%, [according to its website](#).

However, Wagner said none of the school districts in the county she's talked to have entertained the idea of implementing it.

"The schools' reception is 'We don't have a drug problem in our schools,'" Wagner said.

In addition, she said leaflets should be handed out by doctors who prescribe opioids that discuss the potential dangers of the medicine.

"People are dying," Wagner said. "We're fighting with, and for, our lives."

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