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Walking Warriors share their stories

LOCAL NEWS



Photo by Amy DeMien Friends and Family of Matthew Bailey, who lost his life to addiction in early March

NASHUA – Hundreds gathering in Greeley Park to participate in the Walk to Stop Heroin and Opioid Abuse on Saturday, some raising signs protesting the abuse of harmful drugs, others clutching pictures to their chest of family and friends lost to addiction, and many donning “*In Loving Memory*” shirts with the names of loved ones inscribed on the back.

Dubbed as Walking Warriors by event organizer Darlene Pina, these are individuals who have been most affected by the epidemic of heroin and

opioid abuse, those who have lost people close to them or survived their battle with the disease. Together, they walked from Greeley Park to City Hall and back, hoping to serve as an inspiration for those still fighting and to heal the wounds of those dealing with the death of loved ones passed.

Among them was Richard and Amy Carrier. Adorned on the front of their shirts was the name and picture of their daughter, Brandy, who lost her battle with addiction after suffering an overdose on Nov. 16, 2016. Brandy is survived by a 5-year-old daughter who the Carriers have since taken in and raised as their own. They walk not only in memory of their daughter but also for their family members still struggling with addiction.

“We’ve been battling this terrible addiction disease for years through three of our eight children,” Richard Carrier said. *“In the beginning of our battle, we kind of closed ourselves off. You build walls around yourself. You separate yourself from the community and your family because your angry, embarrassed, in denial and afraid. Fear is a big part of it. You ask yourself, ‘What did I do wrong? What should I have done?’ And then we asked ourselves, ‘What are we going to do now to make a difference.’”*

Within the community of Bellows Falls, Vermont, a few miles over the border from their residence in North Walpole, the Carriers now run a community support group for family members who have gone through the trauma of losing loved ones to addiction and for people who have gone through recovery. They also take every opportunity to speak out against addiction and attend events like the Nashua Walk to Stop Heroin/Opioid Addiction.

“We try to help other people, and maybe make a difference, so families don’t have to wear the shirt we’re wearing today,” Mr. Carrier said. *“We’ve met a lot of amazing people at events like this and it’s a blessing because you know you’re not alone.”*

Also walking in memory and support of her children, was Rita Bailey, mother to Matthew Baily, who just recently lost his battle with addiction.

“I lost my son earlier this month and I have another son who’s still recovering from addiction,” Baily said. “My friends and family are here for support and to see if we can help someone else. No parent should have to go through this.”

Some participants walked to remember multiple family members who passed amidst their struggles with addiction, such as Faith Hunter and Michelle Ball from Tyngsborough, Massachusetts, who lost their sister Shirley, brother Arthur, and nephews Jay and Adam to addiction over the course of several years.

“It’s been a hard road and I have another still battling addiction in my family. We’re here for healing process,” Hunter said.

Still, even as many walked to remember and heal, others walked to celebrate their survival and recovery from addiction. Speaking to the entire crowd from the Greeley Park stage about their own experiences with addiction were Ed McDonough, the CEO of Gate House Treatment of New Hampshire, and Tina Smart, a young woman eager to share her long but successful road to recovery.

“Recovery is possible, and at Gate House Treatment we specialize in helping people find that solution,” McDonough said. “Speaking to my own experience, the struggle for me was real. I reached depths I never wanted to go to. I was a former college hockey player and I ended up being charged with armed robbery because of my addiction. I don’t live like that anymore. Now I get help people who are in recovery. Recover is real.”

Smart similarly shared her experience rising from the depths of her addiction to the height of her recovery.

“I started doing things at a young age to try to fit in. I started experimenting with drugs,” Smart said. “As years went on, I got deeper into drugs and spent a lot of time in and out of prison. I became such a mess that I didn’t know what to do, I didn’t know how to stay clean. I have three kids that suffered because of my addiction. I didn’t know how

to take care of them. I wanted something better in my life but didn't know how to get there.

“Then, after my final arrest, I was offered a Drug Corpse program. That's where I learned to change behaviors and gained the awareness of my addiction. I now have relationship with my family and I chase my recovery like I used to chase my drug. If it wasn't for that program I wouldn't be here. I decided to stay with Drug Corpse and help others recover.”

As with McDonough and Smart, many of the individuals and groups in attendance were part of initiatives that either helped people overcome their addiction or provided support to family members dealing with the loss or continued addiction of a loved one.

Following the death of her sister's only child, 29-year-old Devin Timothy Rooney, Jen Ward started a jewelry business called D.A.D. Wings of Addiction to support local addiction charities and offer comfort to those who have lost a loved one to addiction. Each piece of jewelry is given as different meaning with butterfly wings representing hope for recovery, owl wings standing for education and awareness, and angel wings for anyone sick, struggling and in need of a guardian. Ward also customizes the pieces to include the loved one's birthstone if desired.

“The name actually comes from his daughters' names,” Ward said. “D.A.D. stands for Delilah and Ava's Dad's Wings of Addiction. This started as a therapy for me and my sister but then we realized people found comfort in these products.

“We've had people come up to us and share their story and it becomes a kind of therapy for them. It's the littlest comfort but it helps people heal.”

Also at the Walk to promote healing were the kids from Camp Mariposa, a mentoring program offered by the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Nashua that supports children between the ages of 9 and 12 who are impacted by substance abuse in their families. Camp Mariposa works to give these children the knowledge, tools and coping skills to prevent them from

developing an addiction of their own and to help break the intergenerational cycle of addiction.

“I’m here because I know addiction is not just about the people getting sick,” Camp Mariposa member Kyle said. *“It’s about the effect it has the people that love them. I’m here to stop the spread of addiction.”*

With them was Camp Mariposa Mentor Michael Curtin, who later spoke on stage about the positive impact this free weekend camp mentoring program has on the lives of kids in the community who have lost members of their family to addiction or have family members still struggling with it.

“About a year and a half ago the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Nashua teamed up with the Moyer Foundation to run Camp Mariposa and last month we ran our tenth camp,” said Curtin. *“Through the camp kids learn about coping with loss and healing themselves. It also just lets them enjoy a fun weekend away. If anyone is interested in being a part of this program, we are always looking more kids, mentors and sponsors to help keep Camp Mariposa going.”*

Another organization there to offer their services was Hope for New Hampshire Recovery represented at the Walk by Hope for Recovery volunteers Derek Richards and Jonathan Egan.

“I was struggling with addiction for 15 years,” said Egan. *“I was in and out of treatment centers and nothing was really working. During a relapse, I discovered Hope for Recovery and at Hope they have meetings every day to help me recover. I now volunteer there every day. They help so many great people there to help people. They helped me.”*

Egan is one of hundreds who joined the Walk to heal the effects of drug abuse and inspire others who are suffering to find support and seek help.

“I love volunteering at events like this,” said Egan. *“It just makes everything seem worth it and reminds me why I’m sober. These are the days we live for.”*