

Family opens up about overdose of former Chandler High football player

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Family grieves loss of former Chandler High player

Annette and Terry Mahan are trying to save others in the opioid crisis. The Mahan's lost their son Danny, who was a star receiver on Chandler's first state championship football team in 2014, to a fentanyl overdose.

Richard Obert, Arizona Republic

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They had the best day on Jan. 2.

Danny Mahan hit golf balls with his dad. He told his mom that he was sorry about what he had put her through and said, "I'm going to get better."

"My kids will never have a mother like you," the former Chandler High School state champion football player told her.

Annette Mahan walked her son up the stairs that night, gave him a kiss, told him she loved him, and said, "Don't do anything stupid."

But when Terry Mahan got up the next morning and opened his son's bedroom door to check on him, Danny was laying on the floor. He screamed Danny's name. It was 7:30 a.m., Terry remembers, as he called 9-1-1. Paramedics gave Danny two doses of Narcan, an opioid overdose antidote. The drugs didn't revive him.

It was too late.

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A week after coming out of a drug-rehab center in Prescott, 21-year-old Danny was dead. He was another victim of the opioid crisis that has taken teens and young adults across America in epidemic proportions.

According to the National Center for Health Statistics at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in the CDC Wonder database, drug overdose deaths increased in the United States from 16,849 in 1999 to 70,237 in 2017. The sharpest increase was seen in deaths related to fentanyl and other synthetic narcotics with more than 28,000 overdose deaths.

"The main driver of drug overdose deaths were opioids — mainly synthetic opioids (other than methadone), with a 12.9-fold increase from 2007 to 2017," the National Institute on Drug Abuse reports.

"It was a traumatic day. It's been traumatic ever since."

Annette Mahan said of her son Danny's death

The report added, "Drug overdose deaths involving any opioid — prescription opioids (including methadone), synthetic opioids, and heroin — rose from 18,515 deaths in 2007 to 47,600 deaths in 2017; 68 percent of deaths occurred among males."

Forrest Smith, deputy chief and public information officer for the Mesa Fire Department, said, "We have definitely seen an increase."

"Years ago, when I was in the field, we saw more of the illicit drugs like heroin," Smith said.

"We've started to see an increase in Percocets and prescription medication. What we've seen, too, going on is that all socioeconomic classes of people are impacted. It has no zip-code or area-code boundaries.



Annette and Terry Mahan are trying to save others in the opioid crisis. The Mahan's lost their son Danny, who was a star receiver on Chandler's first state championship football team in 2014, to a fentanyl overdose. (Photo: Nick Oza/The Republic)

"Fentanyl has become another issue. As a First Responder, a small contact of that can result in fatal consequences."

At a Gilbert hospital, Terry was told Danny was the sixth person to die of an overdose in the previous 13 days just in Gilbert.

"It was a traumatic day," Annette said. "It's been traumatic ever since."

The Maricopa County Medical Examiner established that Mahan's death was caused by acute fentanyl toxicity. Terry Mahan calls it the "dirty pill" — fentanyl, which is found in counterfeit opioids that is 50 to 100 percent stronger than morphine.

Since his son's death, Terry has read extensively about it, trying to come to grips with Danny's death.

He's been compelled to raise awareness, to help other parents not experience what he calls the "hole in your gut."

This isn't isolated to a young adult after finishing a high school sports career.

Last spring, after pitching Buckeye Verrado to its first state baseball semifinal, 17-year-old Bryan McKinsey was found unresponsive in his home and died on May 9. According to a medical examiner's report, he died from a fentanyl overdose.

It's rare for parents to publicly discuss their child's addiction and death from a lethal overdose.

But Terry and Annette Mahan want people to know what opioid addiction did to their son. They recently opened up to *The Republic* about Danny's death, hoping their story will help others.

"There are a lot of people who need to hear it," Terry said.

"As a parent, you do everything you can to help your child," Annette said.

Terry, who lives in Gilbert and runs a beef business, knows a lot of people. What surprised him after talking about his son's death was the number of people who didn't realize how lethal opioids can be, especially the counterfeit pain killer.

One man did.



Danny Mahan pick up yards against Hamilton during a game Sept. 28, 2012. (Photo: David Kadlubowski/The Republic)

The day Danny died, Terry received a call from Kansas City Chiefs coach Andy Reid, whose son, Garrett, battled drug addiction and died in 2012 at the age of 29 from a reported accidental heroin overdose.

"Andy Reid called me that night and said, 'It's as big and as tough as it's going to get,' " Terry said. "It could happen to anybody. I wish that people would zero in on it. Fentanyl is the one. They say it's a do-or-die situation. Do it and you die."

Terry described the little, sky-blue pill that killed his son and how it landed in his son's possession.

"It's counterfeit pills," Terry said. "It's 'Breaking Bad.' It happens here. They buy pill presses and looks just like them. They don't know the dosage. You get a hot pill, a dirty pill, it's too late."

'I need help'

In high school, Danny Mahan was offered a football scholarship to Northern Arizona, where his dad was a wide receiver from 1982-86. Danny, like his dad, was a kick returner who made plays in space as an elusive slot receiver, at 5-foot-7, 145 pounds. He was one of Bryce Perkins' top targets on Chandler's 6A state championship team in 2014.

A three-year varsity player, Mahan was often called on as a sophomore to make big plays by then-quarterback Darell Garretson.

"He did anything you asked of him," said Rick Garretson, who was the quarterbacks coach then, before recently being elevated recently to head coach at Chandler. "He was fearless, very unselfish, a total team player.

"He made a lot of things happen. With Darell and Bryce, when Danny was out there, they knew when to put the ball in his area, because was going to be open."

Darell Garretson, who went on to play quarterback at Utah State and Oregon State, remembers how Mahan was usually the smallest guy on the field, but "he always found a spot."



Terry Mahan is trying to save others from enduring the same loss of a loved one he experienced because of the opioid crisis. (Photo: Nick Oza/The Republic)

"He wasn't the biggest kid but was always the guy you could find," Darell said. "He knew where to be. He had a great feel for the game."

Former New York Giants wide receiver Lionel Manuel, who was part of two Super Bowl championship teams, worked with Mahan while he was playing at Chandler.

"Danny reminded me of myself," Manuel said. "Danny could play any position. I told him he had an old soul. I always looked forward to seeing him. You try not to have favorites but he was one of my favorite guys. When you needed that first down, he was the guy you went to."

Mahan's hands and speed were going to take him places in football after high school, but concussions, his dad said, "took him out."

Mahan worked in construction and was living at home in Gilbert.

Terry said his son's addiction began at a party where his son was given a Percodan.

"He told me it was to help him sleep, but he did it without a doctor's prescription," Terry said.

Danny was on them for about five months.

Terry said his son would sleep in until about 11 a.m., but he figured that was normal for young adults. He had no idea how serious the pill addiction was.

Finally, Danny came to his father, weeping. "I need help," he said.

Mahan was taken to a drug-rehab center in Prescott, where he spent 55 days, and was going through a 12-step program.

"He was telling me he's going to need me on the ninth step, because that is when he was to come clean," Terry said. "He said, 'You can't get mad,' and I have to listen."



Chandler receiver Danny Mahan breaks away from a pair of Brophy defenders during a game on Nov. 2, 2012. (Photo: Cheryl Evans/The Republic)

Terry said his son confessed that after the party, the euphoria from the pain killer kept him coming back.

"He told me it took him two or three times times and he was hooked," Terry said.

Annette believes her son had an addictive personality, and it hooked him.

"I do believe this, once he started, he was trying to get off of it," Annette said. "He didn't want to be addicted to it. He didn't want to be dependent on anything. When he didn't take the drugs, his body was in pain. It was a very painful withdrawal, so it made him do it again. He was addicted to opioids.

"His behavior did not change. He seemed very much like himself. When he didn't do the drug, he became very angry, frustrated easily. He was ready for change."

They felt the Prescott drug-rehab center was working out, but he was warned that he would be weak and would have urges coming out of rehab the first time.

"When you go there, you have to plug into the big picture," Terry said. "It is going to be a lifelong deal. They're so weak when get out of there. It takes one urge. In Danny's case, he was really trying."

Terry said his son was released on Christmas Eve to spend Christmas with his family. But he didn't want him to return. At 21, Danny was an adult and couldn't be forced back to rehab.

"He felt he had control of it, he could take care of it," Annette said. "He had the tools and he felt he was strong enough to beat it. But obviously he wasn't."

Terry thought he could make their Gilbert home Danny's rehab center. He constantly checked up on his son in the middle of the night to make sure he was breathing.

"I bought in that he was on the way up," Terry said. "You love someone so much that you want to believe it. You do believe it."

"Love is blind. You want your kid to be the kid he always was. But there's no replacing him. He's gone. It puts a hole in your gut. Every day, you wake up and there's that void. That void is never going to be replaced."

Easy to obtain

Dr. Greg Stewart, an orthopedic surgeon in Chandler who works with pro and high school athletes, said the biggest problem is how easily attainable opioids are on the street. He also believes physicians are partly to blame for the epidemic, because "everything is about pain relief."

"We're so fixated on that," Stewart said. "There is pressure on the physician to eliminate pain. That led to over-prescribing of opioids. We prescribe more opioids than any other country in the world by far. In an attempt to feel better, we've over-prescribed for years."



Annette Mahan poses with her young son Danny Mahan in an old family photograph. (Photo: Nick Oza/The Republic)

Stewart said the chemicals released to the brain lead to 30 percent of people becoming dependent on opioids after using them for five days.

"We're facilitating the problem," he said.

Stewart said it's important to look out for the patients' short-term pain to go away, and "not be dependent on narcotics that creates lifetime problems."

Ali Smith, 48, founded SoulSpire Coaching in the Valley as a "bridge for addicts," helping them gain back what they lost and mend families torn apart by addiction.

The daughter of former Arizona, USC and Missouri football coach Larry Smith and sister of Tempe McClintock High School football coach Corbin Smith, Ali is nine years sober from opioids.

"It's not about getting sober but staying sober in everyday life," she said.

Smith said she spent 13 months in prison because of her opioids addiction that began after having a C-section to give birth to her second child. It started in small doses, she said, and she soon became hooked. She had to have it so bad that she ended up getting in trouble for narcotics fraud, she said.

She said she was released from prison on Jan. 29, 2008.

"I got out a day after my dad died," she said. "I was at his service, but I kept using. My excuse was his death. I wanted to get sober.

"I asked for help for the first time. That's when my life changed. I went through the 12-step program. With my work, I get to be reminded on a daily basis what addiction looks like."

Death, she said, is a real part of it.

"Every person in this world will be affected by it, by a family member, a child, a co-worker," she said. "My thing is the more we talk about it and share about it, the better it is."

She spent part of her life in Southern California in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Smith said she was addicted to alcohol in high school and into college, which she said led to her not going to class by the time she was in her second semester of her freshman year in college in San Luis Obispo and ending her 12-year swimming career.

"The addict in our minds, we want more," she said. "I did not know who Ali was. I didn't like me. All the stuff that goes with it. I was never abused as a kid. I think I was born an addict. I was selfish. Everything I did was self-centered and based all about me. I never gave back. I was a

taker my whole life until I got sober. Part of that is giving back. When you can give freely of yourself and not expect anything in return, that's how I choose to live today. That's my own sobriety.

"My story, my experiences have helped save other people. That's why I do what I do. I had all of these experiences. It turned into help for other people going through what I did."

'Driver of the death'

Many of Danny's former Chandler High football teammates attended his funeral. Chase Lucas, N'Keal Harry and Bryce Perkins — guys with whom Danny grew up playing football.

Football dreams turned into reality like it does for so many kids coming out of high school. Still, nobody would have guessed Mahan would become a statistic.

"It was really shocking," Darell Garretson said. "It hits home when someone close like that passes away and how it happened. Danny was awesome. He always brought a smile to your face. When he entered a room, he had you laughing. It was his charisma. He was a great kid to be around."

On Jan. 7, Danny would have turned 22.

Lionel Manuel remembers Terry Mahan talking at the funeral.

"It made me think of the times I should have been calling Danny," Manuel said. "I didn't know he was going through the struggles. You hear it all the time. Two months prior to his death, he posted a picture of himself on Facebook. He looked like he had been working out. He looked like the same person. His smile lighting up the room."

"Danny made choices and we sweep our own porch," Terry said. "My position now is, I don't see enough awareness of what it is.

"I'm not an expert on it, but what I've learned... When you hear pain pill, you think of getting your wisdom teeth pulled. Opioids is one thing, but fentanyl is the driver of the death. You're not going to beat it."

Continuing the conversation

The Republic's Richard Obert joins experts and other guests to discuss the opioid epidemic during azpreps365.com's show on 1580 The Fanatic from 6-7 p.m. on Friday and 8-10 a.m. on Saturday.

To suggest human-interest story ideas and other news, reach Obert at richard.obert@arizonarepublic.com or 602-316-8827. Follow him at twitter.com/azc_obert.

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