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## A LEGACY OF HOPE

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Steve Grant '80 is committed to helping young people fight drug and alcohol problems.  
NOVEMBER 15, 2016 *by Ron Wagner '93, Senior Contributing Writer*

Steve Grant '80 doesn't shy away from telling the story, and you know the ending before it starts. Still, when he's finished no response seems possible.

"My first son died in 2005 in October, which was not unexpected per se. We had done basically five rehabs, hundreds of thousands of dollars, different schools, and nothing seemed to work for any length of time," Grant says. "So him passing away in the house was unfortunate, but it wasn't the punch in the gut that my second son gave us in 2010 when he died of a heroin overdose after being addicted for eight months."

Chris and Kelly were Steve's only two children, and Grant could be forgiven for never getting up from a hit like that. Something inside the former Furman baseball team captain wouldn't allow that to happen, however. He's still not sure what that something is, but Grant remembers very well the moment it began to loosen the grip of emptiness squeezing his life.

"It actually was a Northwestern Mutual event. We periodically have these little retreats that are like boot camps, and literally within the first few minutes they

were talking not about how we could sell more insurance or more financial-services products but about the legacy that we were going to have when we leave this life,” Grant remembers. “And it very much caught me off guard. I had no idea that was going to be the theme of the meeting.”

This was barely two weeks after Grant’s second son, Kelly, had died, and nothing really seemed to matter—until all of the sudden something did.

“We were in a horse shoe, and everybody got a chance to say what their legacy would be. So I stood up, and I had no earthly idea why I said this; it wasn’t close to being on my mind—I said I’m going to do everything I can to help adolescents and young adults fight drug addiction and alcohol problems,” Grant says. “And they asked, ‘why would you do that?’ I told them ‘I’ve lost both of my sons in the last five years to accidental overdoses,’ and of course you could hear a pin drop in the room because most of those people didn’t know me.”



A dedication to Chris and Kelly Grant in the new Chris and Kelly's HOPE fitness park.

The idea for Chris and Kelly's HOPE Foundation was born, and six years later the 501c3 organization has become one of the most powerful forces taking on substance abuse in the Greenville area, giving money to approximately 60 different groups. A prime example is Montford Hall, a residential recovery program envisioned by Alex Kirby, Psy.D., that became a reality in March when it opened in Asheville, N.C.

"(Grant's) contribution to Montford Hall has been substantial," says Kirby. "I'm not saying we wouldn't be open without it, but it certainly made a huge difference in us being open sooner, no question about it."

Montford Hall offers young men a chance to beat addiction that wasn't available for Steve when he and his wife were trying to save their sons' lives.

"I've been working with drug-addicted teenage boys in one setting or another for years," Kirby says. "The best predictor of outcome is length of time in treatment, and that tends to be about a year. Yet most treatment programs in the country are geared around insurance compensation, which tends to be somewhere between 30 and 60 days. We are 29 beds of about 150 beds in the country that provide this kind of treatment, and we're the only one on the east coast. So it's a pretty badly needed resource."

Chris Grant started using drugs when he was 14, and the family fought a losing battle for seven years only to be blindsided five years later by the incomprehensible tragedy of discovering that the other son had become addicted as well.

"My first son and I were very close, and I knew very much about his use. My second son I didn't know really until the mid-point in his youth that he was using, and I really didn't know at the end that he'd restarted," Grant says. "It was rough having a child who was addicted; it was very rough. In fact, it was rougher having a child that was addicted than actually dealing with his death. We used to kid, my ex-wife and I, that, well, here comes Thursday and Friday and Saturday night, and we don't know what's going to happen. It's almost like chaining up the wolfman and hoping he doesn't escape. That's a hard thing to do over a course of six or eight years."

Grant grew up in Paramus, N.J., and ended up at Furman in 1976 after a chance encounter with an acquaintance from his hometown who was attending the University. A good baseball player, he was offered "a little scholarship" after Paladin team coach Tom Wall drove up to watch him play, which he accepted largely for the adventure.

"I said, crap, I've never been 800 miles away from home. I might as well try it. And we got in the car and went to Furman sight unseen," Grant says. "It was a



little tough the first three months. I was a little homesick. But it ended up being a great choice, and it's really directed my whole life."

Grant captained the 1979 and 1980 squads, and after graduation he joined Dave Ellison '72 in building a Northwestern Mutual office in Greenville. Ellison has now known Grant for 36 years, and their sons grew up playing basketball and soccer together. It wasn't easy to see his friend's struggles.

"Neither you nor I nor anybody else can imagine losing both of your only children, your boys, to drug overdoses," Ellison says. "I would say that he just has handled it as well as anybody could and tried and has successfully found an avenue to channel that unbelievable loss into trying to do something positive. You've got to admire someone who has the courage to make something happen that might be good for somebody else out of something that for most people might just ruin their lives."

Courage is what defines Grant to Kirby as well, and not just the courage to keep living productively.

"I only know one other person who's lost both kids, but I haven't known anybody who lost them to the same reasons," Kirby says. "I can't imagine every moment of every day spent grieving over this issue. Steve has been very courageous in being frank about the struggle and risking the criticism that might come from people out of ignorance, really, that don't understand the problem and what causes it. That's a huge thing. Parents are so ashamed, and because of the culture we live in and the misunderstandings about addiction when a kid ends up being a drug addict, the parents get blamed. He was a great dad, and their mom was a great mom. Drug addicts come out of good families all the time."

Sometimes it's impossible for those families to ever admit, even to themselves, that someone was an addict. Grant's refusal to live in that delusion gives his words power.

"Some peoples' brains get twisted when they are faced with unbearable loss, but Steve has gone head on. He doesn't shy away from the fact that his kids were drug addicts and that it was addiction that eventually killed them," Kirby says. "He's been able to be way more effective in helping people and addressing the problem because of his honesty about his kids' struggles. I work in this industry, and I don't see that very often."

Grant is involved with virtually every substance-abuse or mental-illness organization in Greenville, and he is one of only two Northwestern Mutual field members to have received its Community Service Award three times. Since 2013, Chris and Kelly's HOPE Foundation has been sponsored by

Furman football coach Bruce Fowler as a beneficiary of South Carolina Coaches for Charity, and in 2015 Grant was awarded Furman's Lucius Weeks' Distinguished Service Award.

Recently, the Chris and Kelly's HOPE Fitness Park opened just off the Swamp Rabbit Trail near the Furman campus, adjacent to the Phoenix Center's White Horse Academy, a 16-bed residential substance-abuse treatment center for adolescent males. It was dedicated with remarks from U.S. Congressman Trey Gowdy.



The new Chris and Kelly's HOPE fitness park is located just off the Swamp Rabbit Trail near the Furman campus.

“About 1,600 to 2,000 a people a day see that sign for that park . . . I’m proud of that because I’ve always been about raising awareness, and that’s certainly something that helps us raise awareness,” Grant says. “It’s been nice to get this recognition, but it’s really because we’ve been successful raising awareness about what we’re doing, not only in Greenville but throughout the state, and my goal is to move this throughout the country. I wish I had more time in the day.”

Grant’s current focus is persuading more colleges and universities to implement campus recovery programs like the one adopted this year by the

College of Charleston, which Kelly attended before dropping out four credits short of graduating. He was awarded his degree posthumously in December.

“It’s a very big movement across the country,” he says. “In the past if you put on an application ‘I’m addicted to drugs,’ that would probably keep you from getting into school.”

Grant’s experience taught him he wasn’t alone. He also learned stereotypes about drug addicts are outdated, if they were ever accurate at all. One day, Grant hopes it will all be in a book to further increase awareness.

“Heroin is white, middle- and upper-class. It’s the people who wait on you every day. It’s the people you interact with at work,” he says. “I watched both of (my sons) leave my house in body bags, but they both took a different course to it. So it’s an extra-fascinating read, unfortunately.”

Learn more about [Chris and Kelly’s HOPE Foundation](#).

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