

Father commits to fighting addiction and preventing overdoses

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<https://web.musc.edu/about/giving/impact/2017/05/fighting-addiction>

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Steve Grant with sons Chris and Kelly. Photos provided.

One month after his second son died the same way as his first, Steve Grant reluctantly attended a work conference through Northwestern Mutual, where he works as a financial representative in Greenville. The speakers opened that morning in 2011 by telling the group that they didn't want to talk about selling more insurance but instead to challenge their audience with a question: What will be your legacy?

Grant listened as colleagues, seated in a half-circle around a table, talked about setting aside money in their estates for animal welfare groups and other nonprofits. When it was his turn, he said out loud something he hadn't even considered before that moment.

"I'm going to do something to stop adolescent drug abuse," Grant told the group. He wanted to help to other young people like his sons, Chris and Kelly. He hoped to save lives and spare parents the emptiness and guilt he felt at the time.

Grant raised more than \$100,000 that first year through Chris and Kelly's HOPE Foundation and now supports organizations across the state and beyond, including MUSC's Center for Drug and Alcohol Programs. His Red Ribbon Classic golf tournament, which celebrated its fourth year in May, brought in \$85,000 this year alone for MUSC and recovery programs in Greenville.

Grant takes special interest in MUSC's focus on the science of addiction, the way the center treats alcohol and drug abuse as a condition of the brain and not a lifestyle choice. "I like their mission," he said, "and I like that they're on the road talking to people."

Grant first learned about the Center for Drug and Alcohol Programs when he met community outreach coordinator Sylvia Rivers after speaking at a Rotary Club of Charleston breakfast meeting. "Steve got up and so bravely talked about how he lost both sons to accidental overdoses, instead of hiding it because of the stigma," Rivers said. "He wants to stop this."

She visited with Grant in Greenville and told him about the center's work, both in research and community education, including her traveling school lectures on how drugs and alcohol affect young brains. MUSC's addiction and outreach prevention relies solely on philanthropy, according to Rivers, and Grant not only contributes financially but promotes MUSC as a statewide resource.

"He supports with dollars, but he really showcases our work in the Upstate," she said. "He's gotten me in front of other people and foundations. It's really making a difference."

Addiction became personal for Grant when his older son, Chris, was just 14. A man hired to clean his carpets found dozens of beer cans stashed under furniture around the house. Chris, a varsity basketball and soccer player, blamed the beer on older friends, according to Grant, but soon experimented with marijuana and later cocaine and methadone.

Chris went to five rehabilitation centers in as many years and, with every stint, committed to staying clean and pursuing his dream of a career in sales. But each time, his father said, Chris relapsed. And Chris's sales career never extended beyond selling the same drugs he consumed.

Chris checked in with his father often. When he didn't call one day in 2005, Grant rushed home to find Chris lifeless in his bed, after a fatal combination of cocaine and methadone. He was 21.

"I saw him sort of snorting in his sleep that day and thought he was just snoring," Grant said. "Actually, he was dying."

After Chris's funeral, Grant sent his younger son, Kelly, straight back to college in Alabama. Grant wanted to insulate his younger son by keeping life normal. But in retrospect, Grant wishes he had given Kelly more time to grieve.

Kelly later moved home and then transferred to College of Charleston, where he studied psychology and joined an up-and-coming band as its drummer. A new friend introduced him to heroin, Grant said, and Kelly landed in the emergency room after overdosing in a downtown parking lot. Grant didn't know until he received the hospital bill.

He brought Kelly home and drug tested him every other day. Kelly cleaned up, went back to Charleston and then relapsed again. A bandmate called Grant, who rushed to Charleston to scoop up his son once more.

Kelly seemed better over time and even moved into his own apartment, Grant said. The two kept in close contact and watched "Mad Men" together every Sunday.

When Kelly didn't arrive in time for the show one night and didn't call, Grant rode over to his apartment. He saw Kelly's car in the driveway and felt a familiar worry in his stomach that snapped him back to Chris's death five years earlier. He broke in the door and found his remaining child dead in his bed with a needle in his arm. Kelly was 24.

"They were very different," Grant said. "My first son was addicted for eight years, and my second son was addicted for eight months. So I support all stages of addiction prevention."

Grant wants to encourage honest dialogue from parents about drugs and alcohol. He wants to educate people on the science of addiction. And he wants to raise as much money as he can to support groups that share his mission and work to get people better.

Or, as he puts it, "I won't let money stand between someone and recovery."

About the Author

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