



# The Drug crisis: Taking lives and shattering families

*December 9, 2024 Sharon Curtis*

**Two parents live the worst nightmare a parent could ever face – the death of a child.**



*Zachary Newhook Randell, left, died from a cocaine overdose on July 15, 2022. Reed McGregor died on January 6, 2021, from a fentanyl overdose.*  
Photos courtesy of Stephen L. Randell and Gail McGregor

Stephen L. Randell and Gail McGregor share a connection that no parent wants to share – the loss of a child because of a drug overdose.

McGregor's daughter, Reed, died of a fentanyl overdose.

She found Reed's lifeless body in the basement of their Toronto home in 2021.

Reed's boyfriend supplied the lethal drug.

She was 24 years old and a student at Toronto Metropolitan University, formerly Ryerson University.

“She was a few credits shy from graduating with a double degree in business and marketing,” McGregor said.

Reed never got the chance to cross the stage and be handed the degree she worked so hard for. It was granted posthumously and unceremoniously arrived in the mail one day.

“Reed was a deeply empathic person,” said her Mom. “She was involved in sports. She studied French. She was supportive of all her friends. She had an older brother and a younger sister. She was dedicated to her studies even through her active addiction.”

What began as smoking pot in junior high eventually transitioned to illicit drugs.

Within 24 hours of Reed’s death, the dealer who sold her the drug was arrested for trafficking.

More than 3,000 kilometers away in St. John’s, Zachary, Randell’s son, died of a cocaine overdose.

On the morning before he died, Zachary told his father he was meeting a friend in Mount Pearl.

It was the final conversation Randell had with his 26-year-old son.

“He was a great kid,” said Randell, who wrote a book about his nightmare called *My Child Is An Addict*. “He went to school, he had a job, lots of friends and he loved hockey.”

Zachary was found dead in a local park. A memorial bench now marks that spot. It’s a place where families and friends can go to reflect and remember.

The memories remain painful for McGregor and Randell. There’s no moving on. It’s as fresh now as it was then.

McGregor often has to stop the Team’s interview. More than once, she disappears from the computer screen and fights with her emotions off camera before returning.

But, neither parent are alone. Their grief is shared with far too many other parents.

The province’s office of the chief medical examiner reported 73 drug toxicity-related deaths for 2023 in Newfoundland and Labrador. According to a [CBC article](#), there were 31 drug toxicity deaths as of August 2024.

Emily Wadden, program manager with Safe Works Access Program in the province’s capital city, says she expects the number of deaths to be higher in 2024 due to the increasingly toxic drug supply. Safe Works offers such things as sterile drug supplies and naloxone kits.

According to Dr. Nash Denic, the province’s chief medical examiner, the word “overdose” is not used in official documentation.

“Most drug toxicity-related deaths are accidental, meaning they are not intentional,” said Denic.

In 2023, 8,049 people died of opioid poisoning in Canada.

Angie Hamilton, co-founder and executive director of [Families for Addiction Recover in Scarborough, Ont.](#), believes there are two parts to the current drug crisis.

“We have a crisis because drugs aren’t being regulated but we also have a crisis because we have always underfunded and had discrimination with respect to the treatment of addiction,” Hamilton said.

“It is a question of striking the right balance between decriminalization of drugs and a regulated supply.”

A new report from the [Canadian Mental Health Association](#) titled, *The State of Mental Health in Canada in 2024* puts the crisis in perspective.

“The toxic drug supply in Canada is the second deadliest in the world following the U.S.,” read the report.

There are no easy answers, says Hamilton.

“People use drugs for a reason, often it’s trauma, 50 per cent is genetic, there are environmental factors, personality traits, mental health and social determinants such as homelessness,” Hamilton said.

Hamilton draws upon an analogy to distinguish the difference between what is done to help people planning suicide versus what is done to help people suffering from drug addiction.

“If someone is at the edge of a bridge about to jump, nobody questions someone who drags them off (the bridge) and into a hospital until they are stable and can be released,” said Hamilton, “We don’t do that with addiction.”

To Hamilton, there’s no difference between addiction and suicide.

“Why do we intervene for suicide and not for addiction? A lot of it is stigma and a lot of it is assuming that these are bad people who are using drugs which makes them a criminal. Therefore the place for them is jail and not somewhere where they are going to be treated,” Hamilton said.

Another solution is to provide on-demand treatment for mental health and addictions. Currently an addict seeking treatment can languish on a waitlist for a year or more before a space opens up.

“The waitlists are over a year, well, guess what, just do a little bit (of drugs) while you wait,” said Hamilton.

“The status quo is you got to want help. If you don’t, we’re not helping you. Then the families are the ones that are trying to keep their loved ones alive.”

For both Randell and McGregor, one last conversation with their children would allowed them to ask why. More importantly, it would have been another chance to tell Zachary and Reed how much they love them.

“I would apologize to him because it’s easy to feel like you failed them.” said Randell. “Beyond that, I would ask him why he went down that road and I’d tell him how great he was and that I love him.”

McGregor’s message to her daughter is simple, but it’s also a message for every child, every person caught in the depths of addiction.

“Don’t give up. Recovery is possible.” said McGregor. “I love you.”