

Kerry Bickford

Glen Lord, SADOD Director

Kerry Bickford is a loving mother in an All-American middle-class family. She was a youth development educator for 25 years on beautiful Cape Cod, where she and her husband, Rick – a licensed clinical social worker, also lived and raised three boys, Jared, Caleb, and Nathan (the youngest).

But like many families in the region, the Bickfords have had to deal with substance use disorder in gut-wrenching ways. As a high school freshman Jared, an athlete, started smoking marijuana. Kerry and Rick tried to persuade him to hold off. Caleb followed in his brother's footsteps, but not Nate. He was a straight-A student, an athlete, a National Honor Society member, and a Presidential scholar. He stayed on the straight and narrow, and Rick and Kerry constantly reminded him that his brothers were making bad decisions and that he could learn from their mistakes. It seemed to be working, until it wasn't.

The first time Nathan used drugs, a switch in his brain was flipped that could not be reversed. Marijuana use quickly led to cocaine and heroin. Nathan fought this disease ferociously, having several significant recovery periods until he eventually relapsed. He focused on recovery like he did everything else, with hard work and determination, but he could not maintain long-term sobriety, and he became increasingly discouraged.

Nathan spent time in treatment at Gosnold, and when he was released, the counselor told Rick and Kerry they would be making a big mistake if they let him return home. So they said, "You can't come home, and the reason you can't come home is not that we don't love you. It's because we love you so much. We don't want you to die." So he moved into North Cottage, where he did pretty well, and everyone felt it made sense for him to come home after almost a year of hard work. Once again, Nathan did well until he didn't, and the traumatic death by suicide of a close friend sent Nathan off the deep end.

He was hospitalized and discharged to a treatment program, but this was followed closely by a series of relapses -- in rapid succession -- ultimately leading Nathan to the Bridge Clinic in 2017, where they started medicine for opioid-use disorder suboxone. Following a series of more ups and downs and shortly after being discharged from a section 35 drug treatment program, Kerry's phone rang on the Friday before Mother's Day 2018. It was a jubilant and sober Nate, and Kerry was equally ecstatic to hear from him.

She asked, "So, what's the plan?" "I want to come home," was Nathan's immediate response. "OK, go to the train station, and I will buy you an cxelectronic ticket. We'll meet you in Braintree."

Two hours later, Nathan was grinning at his parents from the back seat of their car with the dogs in his lap. He needed clothes, so they stopped on the way home to shop. As Kerry and her son walked out of the store into the sun, Nathan held the door and smiled shyly at Kerry. "Happy Mother's Day," he said softly. Did I say that? I meant to."

She immediately knew what he meant. It was more than Happy Mother's Day. It was – I'm here. I'm alive. I'm sorry. I know you love me. I love you too. Three months later, Nathan died from an accidental overdose complicated by endocarditis.

With a tear in her eye, Kerry recalled the first Mother's Day after Nathan passed away. She shared with me a Heart of Gold figurine she received. It arrived by mail, and the card read, "I will be with you forever. Love, Nathan." Kaileigh (her granddaughter) had done that. As Kerry says now: "Honestly, that's how I got through that first Mother's Day. That thoughtful gesture made me feel like he was still here, which he always is -- in spirit."

A year after Nate died, the Cape Cod Neighborhood Support Coalition approached Kerry and Rick about starting a desperately needed support group for people who have lost a loved one to overdose. Nathan's Circle began meeting on the second Tuesday of the month in November 2019. Then, in 2020, Kerry became editor of the SADOD Newsletter, VOICES, dedicating her work to Nathan's memory. As a grandparent raising two grandchildren (JJ & Kaileigh, now 18 and 20), Kerry was appointed to the Massachusetts Grandparent Commission by Governor Deval Patrick in 2009 (serving until 2019) and has facilitated a support group for custodial grandparents since 2011. Since many GRGs are also dealing with the overdose death of an adult child, Kerry began a monthly Peer Grief Support ZOOM group with The Sun will Rise Foundation (TSWR). She and TSWR are currently planning Heart-to-Heart workshops to support adults who are talking to kids about grief. Kerry's own grandchildren's mother died of an overdose in 2010 and she has led support groups for grieving children, including military children impacted by the deployment or death of an immediate family member.

Kerry not only survives but thrives; she has a purpose: "When you join in with a group that is committed to supporting people around the intersection of substance use disorder and grief, you learn how important it is to allow people the space and dignity to grieve their loved ones without feeling like they have to apologize or hide," Kerry says.

This Mother's Day was, once again, different from others Kerry has celebrated. She is a bereaved mother to Nate, a supportive one to Caleb as he struggles with SUD, and a caring mother to Jared as she continues to help him by raising JJ and Kaileigh. She and Rick are committed to all of them.

Kerry does not apologize or hide. Kerry Bickford is the mother of a typical All-American middle-class family, not despite her challenges in life but because of them.