

Robyn Houston-Bean

By Kerry J. Bickford, Newsletter Editor

Robyn Houston-Bean was heading out the door to work one morning in May 2015, when she stopped short and turned around. Her 20-year-old son, Nick, was supposed to have left for his shift as an Emergency Medical Technician hours earlier, but his car was still in the driveway. She hurried up the three stories to his attic bedroom and was shocked to find him unresponsive and not breathing. She screamed for help and began CPR, but it was too late. Nick had died at some point overnight, after saying “Good night” and “I love you” to his mother.

Robyn wandered around her house in a fog in the days that followed, most of which she cannot recall. One day she picked up a notebook that she happened upon and flipped it open. She was stunned to see the words “the sun will rise” in Nick’s handwriting accompanied by a beaming sketch of bright sunlight. She realized she had stumbled upon his recovery journal and that this must have been Nick’s daily mantra. She thumbed through the pages, and asked herself, “how could this have happened?”

Nick was the middle child of three. He had tested into the John Hopkins Talented Youth program in sixth grade. He was voted “most memorable” in high school by his peers, where he was known to wear “hug me” buttons and purple pants. But, Robyn now realizes, behind his quirky personality, Nick was depressed and hiding a secret from his family. When they discovered he was using heroin, they went into high gear, and supported him through detox, followed by long-term outpatient treatment at Mass General. He seemed to be doing well and earned an Emergency Medical Technician certificate while he worked hard at his recovery. His decision to get off of Suboxone at about this time was probably premature, Robyn speculates, and he began to have cravings. He had been abstinent from heroin for seven months when he relapsed for the first time — and tragically, his last.

As the months went by after Nick’s death, Robyn was introduced to a bereaved mother whose son was buried in the same cemetery as Nick. That was followed by another introduction to a mom who was involved in an event for the non-profit Hand Delivered Hope. Robyn and her sister started working with them to provide street deliveries to the homeless living in active addiction on the streets of Boston. Through this work, she gained a sense of purpose and learned that she could have a life beyond “crying on her sofa.” Soon after, she learned about a Brighton GRASP support group run by Rhonda Lotti, who became “a mentor and friend.”

“It was here,” says Robyn, “I found my tribe.”

After attending the support group in Brighton for several months, Robyn held her first peer grief support group at Braintree Town Hall, and named it “The Sun Will Rise” from Nick’s own words. Eight people showed up on that first night, the number quickly doubled, then tripled, and before long, she founded “The Sun Will Rise Foundation.” Over the last five years, the number of grief support groups has grown from one to nine, many of which have met virtually since the pandemic. In addition to providing this grief support, TSWR Foundation hosts a yearly Beanstalk Music Festival, a fundraiser that raises money to help people in recovery and funds other community projects related to addiction.

Robyn’s mission took on a life of its own, once she realized “helping others was helping me,” a recurring theme for her and for other peer grief support group facilitators. Her service to others is inspiring, especially when you realize it began in the darkest hour of her grief, when the words Nick left behind reminded her, the sun will rise. Her own journey of self healing continues and serves as a model and a lifeline to so many others.