

Tracy and Gary Carter

By Luke Schmaltz, VOICES Newsletter Editor

On a hot day in March 2018, Tracy and Gary Carter found themselves in front of Purdue Pharmaceuticals in Stamford, CT, protesting the manufacture and distribution of dangerous prescription drugs.

There, they met Mary Peckham from Team Sharing who had prepared sandwich boards displaying pictures of loved ones who had died from prescription drug-related issues. Gary volunteered to carry one, and a few hours later when he removed the board, he had a sweat pattern on the front of his shirt in the shape of a perfect heart. On the back of his shirt, were two vertical sweat imprints which looked exactly like wings. Angel wings. The Carters interpreted these phenomena as a sign from their deceased son, Bryant, who had recently passed away from fentanyl poisoning.

Bryant struggled with substance use for years and had been in recovery until he needed an emergency appendectomy. The procedure, which required pain medication, caused him to relapse. When Bryant died, the Carter family was devastated – Tracy and Gary were heartbroken, lost, and confused.

A Family in Peril

Tracy and Gary decided to seek help in order to find ways to cope with the crippling grief. “[We were] worrying about each other, knowing we could not let the other fall into the abyss,” Gary begins. “We knew just going through the motions would not work for long, so we looked for help. We joined a local peer grief group run by Kathy Leonard in Marlborough but were overwhelmed at the first meeting. We decided to try it one more time and it probably saved our lives. Eventually, we realized so many others were in our shoes and as we would hear of someone else with a similar loss we would reach out and invite them to dinner just to help them navigate the early stages and give them the direction to find help. We also found Team Sharing and found our tribe,” he explains.

The Carters sought additional support through their long-standing membership with the Maynard-Clinton Elks Club. Gary was inspired by the club’s drug awareness program, which takes two trailers to big events for handing out sports gear to kids and literature to parents. He wondered if he could design a trailer for teaching parents about detecting substance use among their kids. The space could be converted into a mock bedroom for demonstrating how to find out if a child or teen is becoming involved with dangerous substances, and the idea for Hope’s Room was born.

After securing funding for the idea through a donation from the Massachusetts Elks, a trailer was purchased and the Carters got to work refinishing the interior. Soon after, they began their journey of healing through outreach and education about early intervention. Hope’s Room operates through Team Sharing and is administered exclusively by Gary and Tracy Carter – who also serve on the organization’s board of directors.

A Deliberate Strategy

The Carter’s primary focus is on educating parents about diversion safes, which are normal-looking items one would find in a bedroom which are used to hide prescription pills and illegal drugs. “Clever things like LED light bulbs that come apart and you can hide stuff in them or soda cans that feel full, but the lid screws off and it’s hollow inside,” Gary says. “A lint roller where the end of [the handle] opens up and somebody could hide something in it. It doesn’t look like it’s out of place,” he explains. “You have to be willing to put your hands on things to make sure they are what they appear to be.”

The Carters are driven by the fact that many parents are simply unaware of how pervasive substance use is among children and teens, while many choose to believe that such activity is simply impossible within their family. “That’s the piece I love the best,” Tracy begins, “The opportunity to prompt a conversation. Many of them are in awe and are like, ‘Man, I had no idea. The ones who stop and take notice are truly interested,’” she says. “To be able to tell them, ‘We knew, and we still couldn’t do enough,’ is really powerful.”

The Lesser of Two Evils

The Carters acknowledge the invasive nature of this sort of early intervention by pointing out the alternative. “You can’t save somebody if you don’t keep them alive,” Gary says. He recites a speech he delivers to parents after a Hope’s Room educational session. “Nobody is ever sad about a storm they prepared for that never showed up. You need to prepare for this storm. It may never get to your doorstep, hopefully it never does. But you need to find out what the resources are before ever discovering you have a child with a problem, because there’s good and bad out there and you need to do your homework and find out what places have had success, and which ones to avoid, and have a plan for your child. Once you are trying desperately to save your child’s life by navigating the broken system, it is like an episode of that reality TV show called Wipeout,” he says.

A Strategy for Grieving

When it comes to managing their grief, the Carters pour themselves into their outreach work as a way to cope. “Helping is healing,” Gary says. “That’s why we do what we do through Team Sharing and The Sun Will Rise Foundation. We facilitate peer groups and grief groups. It’s therapeutic for us as well. That’s not to say it doesn’t still hurt, I was in tears last night for most of the time as I was writing [an] email [about Bryant],” he says.

Tracy explains that managing their grief sometimes requires them to step away from their outreach entirely to enjoy other activities. “We try really hard to do things together – like, we’re in a couple of card leagues,” she begins. “We stay active with the Elks in the other things they do to not always be focusing on grief and addiction. We try to do things that aren’t related to it.”

Gary continues, “We have found that it takes time, and I tell this to people, ‘It is possible to feel joy again,’” he says. “I started a hobby after my son passed, my wife doesn’t really care for it, but it brings me joy,” he muses. “I collect and restore old cast-iron cookware, and it occupies me a bit. Although now that people know I do it I tend to be like the mechanic who’s got the worst-running car in the neighborhood because he’s working on everybody else’s,” he chuckles. Advice for the Bereaved.

The Carters offer time-tested advice for anyone who is new to grief – especially from the loss of a child to substance use. “You should not be trying to do this alone. Find your people, that’s what helped us survive – it’s amazing. Also, you don’t need to explain yourself to anybody. If someone is expecting you somewhere and you don’t want to go – you just don’t go.” Gary says.

“I always tell people,” Tracy begins, “If you get up in the morning, that’s a success. I really encourage people to find small successes. You might have to stay in bed all day but try to eat something. You’re going to be hard enough on yourself, so you don’t have to listen to all the noise. If someone says you’re doing it [grieving] wrong, you need to move on and find someone who lets you do you,” she says.