**Ann Perry**

**Narrator**

**Amy Sullivan**

**Interviewer**

**July 6, 2016**

**Minnetonka, Minnesota**

Ann Perry -**AP**

Amy Sullivan -**AS**

**AP:** We’re going to go there and celebrate. We got to know her and she said, “I was just at a drug task force meeting and Spencer’s name came up.” She said, “There’s a huge investigation going on between Carver County and Anoka County.” He died in Anoka County in Columbia Heights. “There’s some inter-relationship with everything. Do you mind if I give your numbers to the investigators?” I was up at the cabin and Dean said, “Absolutely, but Ann’s been talking to the Anoka County investigator.” Then I heard two weeks ago, I’ll have you read it.

**AS**: What, to think about the investigation?

**AP**: Yes, what if they find somebody? Spencer probably would have known this person or asked him to buy heroin.

**AS**: Don’t you think they’re just looking so that they can bust somebody?

**AP**: I think they’re to go as high up the ladder that they can. Does it affect me as a mom?

**AS**: I don’t know if it’s going to affect you as a mom at all. It’s so confusing because it’s our child’s addiction.

**AP**: He said, “I really want to find this person that made Spencer accessible to his addiction.” There’re lots of people who make him accessible. I was always so fearful of the public safety people.

**AS**: Why? What do you mean?

**AP**: Just because they’re looking for the glory of these big drug busts. I just remember that when they had the Hennepin County heroin town hall meeting.

**AS**: When we went to that, you and me and Kim.

**AP**: When they threw away all our Nar-Anon flyers. We were just starting the Nar-Anon. We ran off fifty copies of the flyers for our meetings and thought there might be some parents there.

**AS**: Yes, there were a lot of parents there I think.

**AP**: We asked at one of the tables if we could display these. The woman said, “Well let me check with the sheriff to make sure it’s okay.” When it was over we went by the garbage can and there they all were.

**AS**: No! They hadn’t even been put on…

**AP**: On the table.

**AS**: Then they made us all sign in and wanted to get our email addresses.

**AP**: Andy Luger says if you just keep your kids in sports and talk about it around the dining room table. Here were the four front rows full of parents with dead children. How insensitive can you get?

**AS**: That same message came from someone who spoke from Teen Challenge. You needed to have dinner with your children. I remember looking at you and Kim.

**AP**: Well that didn’t work. [laughs]

**AS**: Where we are at right now, our kids aren’t in seventh grade anymore. This isn’t the DARE program.

**AP**: Hopefully they’re past that message.

**AS**: I’m not sure they are. If you want to just read that release form. This is Amy Sullivan it is July 6, 2016. I’m at Ann Perry’s home in Minnetonka, Minnesota. She’s folding laundry and we’re sitting at the kitchen table. The electricity went out last night in a huge storm, so there are generators going all over the neighborhood here. Ann, would you state your name and say that you give me permission to record this?

**AP**: Yes, Amy. My name is Ann Perry and I give you, Amy Sullivan, permission to record this interview.

**AS**: Thanks. Let’s start with your childhood, where you were raised, what your childhood was like, your early adulthood, parenthood. You can just keep going and I’ll ask questions as I need to.

**AP**: I was born in 1951. I’ll be sixty-five at the end of the month. I was the second of six children. I was born in Wisconsin, but my parents moved here, I believe, when I was two. My father fought in World War II. He was a very young recruit or enlistee. I think in 1944. He was put in a division that liberated a lot of the concentration camps in Europe, which has some bearing on what I’ll say later. He has a half-sister that’s five years older than he. His parents were very close to me growing up. I’d often go and stay with them during the summertime because of the number of children my mom had. My mother grew up in Wisconsin. My father grew up in Wisconsin. They met in high school. She went to college and she became a nurse during World War II, but she never practiced because the war ended afterwards. She grew up with a degree but never using the degree in her professional life until later.

Early on in my childhood my dad became an alcoholic. I think a lot of it had to do with the trauma he experienced in World War II and what he saw in World War II. That’s probably not the only reason. He probably had some alcohol addiction in his family, too. It was very difficult growing up in a family, especially with six kids, with an alcoholic. My mother often put me in the position of being a parent. We would find my dad passed out on the floor. She would have me run up and get a doctor. I often found myself having to take care of her because she was always wimping out for things like that. I had a real strong relationship with my oldest sister until she got into junior high. Then she became very distant from me. I always kind of feel like I raised myself. I grew up by raising myself. It has its good and bad traits about it.

When I went to high school I became very wild. I got suspended from school once. I drank, smoked pot and hash. Then I went off to college. I wasn’t really a serious student until I was probably a junior. Then I became very interested in history and geography. I got a double major. Then a girlfriend and I went to Europe, we hitch hiked around. It was so much fun. Then I came back and didn’t really know what to do. First, I got a teaching degree and in student teaching discovered that I really didn’t like teaching kids, middle and high school. One of my professors taught an urban planning class. I took that and became enamored with it. The head of the department told me about an urban planning master’s program down in St. Louis. I went down there. I didn’t know a soul, probably the best thing for me.

I was registering for classes and I met my husband Dean. I was dating somebody else. We just became good friends, it was a two year graduate program, and we just became good friends. Then the second year he asked if I would move in, just as friends. I did and I think there were only two women out of the program of eighty people. This was before women got into college and did things.

**AS**: What year is this? Do you remember?

**AP**: That was in 1975. I graduated in ’77. We got married a week after; my mom planned the whole wedding. We had nothing to do with it. We all said we’d go where the first job was. That was when affirmative action was really big. Being a white female, I didn’t have any problem getting a job. I wanted to go back to Minnesota because I loved it. Dean was from Valparaiso, Indiana. We both moved here. Dean had a terrible time finding a job, being a white male. He eventually did, and I think we were married four years before we had Spencer. I had a midwife and it was great. I’ll never go through childbirth again though without having drugs. [laughs] Spencer was born, and I worked for the City of Minnetonka. Dean worked for the City of Rosemount. We lived in South Minneapolis. We decided we should probably move close to one of our jobs. We found our house out in Minnetonka.

**AS**: That’s this house?

**AP**: No, it’s another house close by. We found a wonderful daycare, it was a family daycare. It was a little hobby farm and all the kids got to bottle feed the little lambs. It was wonderful. Spencer, he had a wonderful childhood. We held him back, he was a summer baby. We put him through when he five, should he go to kindergarten or not? They recommended that he did, which was a mistake. He didn’t do well socially his first year of kindergarten. At the family daycare the family daycare mom, we became very close friends, our families; had a son who was about a year older than Spencer. Spencer was terribly bullied at that daycare. We ended up taking him out and switched him over to a different school so he wouldn’t have the stigma of being with the same kids for a repeated grade. Spencer always kind of resented us for that. Even though in later years he’ll admit how terrible the bullying was. I never knew about it and Spencer would never say anything about it.

He had a wonderful elementary school. Although he wasn’t the best student, he was always very smart. Red hair shenanigans, always played sports. He loved T-ball and baseball. He was in Little League. He and Dean were in the Y Guide program. He always had a problem; he would never want to stay over at other people’s homes for the night with other kids. One time he spent the night with a good friend. He ended up walking home because he didn’t want to be apart from us. He was always very close to us. Both of our jobs, being in the public employment, you had a lot of night meetings. You had to hold meetings when people were done with their jobs during the day. I was gone a lot, Dean was gone a lot. In our parenting we would always make sure we’d always schedule our meetings so the other person could go and be there. We were gone and I always felt so guilty for that.

I love my job. I had a boss who was absolutely wonderful. He would push me so much to do as well as I could. That kind of overcame some of the guilt of mothering. Growing up out in the suburbs you didn’t have a big network of working moms back then, like you do now. My network of working moms were people in the daycare, either work or in daycare. It still remains strong today. We still get together for daycare mom group meetings. I know your transcriber can’t see but I want to show you pictures. It’s just in the other room here. Shelley and her cousins and my sisters put these boards together for the funeral. This was his childhood. There’re pictures of him as a baby with his cousins. I made all his Halloween costumes, wrestling, swimming.

**AS**: Oh, look at that red hair.

**AP**: He was a very sensitive, shy boy. He just loved doing things. I’m going to cry. I’m going to get the Kleenex box. That’s okay. This is very good for me to talk about this. This was up until probably junior high. Slip n’ slide, baseball. How could this kid become addicted to heroin? You look at these pictures. I kept thinking, “Is it because I worked so much?”

Then back when he, I think he was entering seventh grade, the city manager left to become director of the League of Cities for Minnesota. A new city manager was hired where I worked. He just didn’t have the values that the previous manager had. I just thought, “I’m not willing to work this hard for somebody that doesn’t have the same values that I do.” I thought, “Well I’ll take some time off. I’ll be able to spend time with Spence.” I was really worried about him.

**AS**: How old was he at this point?

**AP**: He was twelve, thirteen. Getting to the point where he could probably come home from school on his own.

**AS**: And get in some trouble?

**AP**: I was so worried about that. I took time off and Shelley, his sister, and I drove him up to Camp Menogyn. He and another friend went there and Shelly and I were going to camp and drive around Lake Superior. We ended up having car trouble and never made it. I did okay.

**AS**: At home?

**AP**: At home. I was sort of rattling around the house. I thought, “I just am not being stimulated.” I was getting crabby. I went back to work; I did contract work then went back to work full-time. Then he started middle school.

**AS**: Spencer was born in 1981.

**AP**: In middle school through high school pictures—it was called junior high back then—it was seventh, eighth, and ninth grade. In eighth grade he got caught in school. He had put some booze in a water bottle and he got caught, he and another friend. That was really his first foray that we knew, of him using substances. Dean and I always drank in front of him. We didn’t drink a lot.

**AS**: It was in your house.

**AP**: Then we found a bottle of vodka that had been refilled with water. Then at fifteen or sixteen we caught him with his good friend John, his parents are the ones coming from Montana today. I think he’s in one of these pictures.

**AS**: Is this Dean?

**AP**: That’s Dean and Spence. They look so much alike. Every summer we’d go up to Ely to a camp called Camp Van Vac. It was just kind of stone cabins. It did have electricity, cold running water, central bathrooms. We just loved it.

I think he started smoking pot when he was fifteen. He got caught by the police, he and two other guys were parked in a car and the police came up to them, opened the car doors and smoke just billowed out. Pot. The police, bless their hearts, kept them in the jail cell longer than they had to and then released them.

**AS**: To try to make an impression. Was this here in Minnetonka?

**AP**: I think it was the Orono or Long Lake police. They notify the schools right away. Spencer was on the baseball team. He got kicked off the baseball team, which is what you do for somebody in trouble. It just irritated me. Then he had to go to chemical dependency…

**AS**: So backtrack. Tell me what you mean about being kicked off?

**AP**: Being kicked off of the baseball team, it always impressed me that here kids in trouble could not participate in healthy activities.

**AS**: They see it as a punishment. It’s a privilege to be able to play on the team.

**AP**: I don’t know if that view is still held today or not. I understand that he has to be accountable, but to punish him by taking him out? Then he went to a chemical dependency class that the high school ran. It was very good. It was run by a wonderful counselor. I think he had to do that for six months. I noticed from the time he was fifteen, I think probably here, we went out to Montana to visit our friends. I don’t think he smiled that whole year he was fifteen. We’d tell jokes, take him to counseling, took him to a therapist who thought he had ADD. He was on Ritalin. That’s another thing I feel terribly guilty about. I think that was either eighth or ninth grade that started. High school was relatively benign. He had good buds; he did a lot of activities that we thought were healthy. He told us later that he was smoking pot the whole time he was in high school.

Then he went to college. He didn’t know where he wanted to go. I, of course, filled out his applications. He got accepted at the U [University of Minnesota] and went there. He was very, very homesick. He lived down there. He would come home a lot and then the second year he asked if he could live on…I can just picture it, it’s right off here, the tall building, it was brand new when he moved in, student housing. He moved in with three other high school friends that were doing fairly well, but all they did was party.

**AS**: So he moved off campus?

**AP**: It was off campus. What was the name of that? We tried and tried to keep him back in. We talked to the counselors. He’d go in. He was put on probation. We even had his pediatrician write him a note about his ADD. We were very into enabling, into doing everything we could to keep him in college. He, looking backwards, he was probably one who should have taken a year or two off before going to college to figure things out. We didn’t want him to; we thought college is the way to go.

**AS**: Can you back up for a second and talk about his sister?

**AP**: Shelley was born in 1984.

**AS**: So they’re three years apart.

**AP**: She was always a delightful, happy child until ninth grade. Then she sunk into a horrible depression. A depression so bad she would drag her mattress into our room and sleep in our room with us. She could not get out of bed. She said, “It felt like it was enveloping me and taking me down.” She was so sad and so she went to heavy duty counseling. They put her on antidepressant meds. Every one you can think of.

**AS**: To just find something that worked?

**AP**: Until we found something that worked. She gained a horrible amount of weight. She survived; she did very well in school. She wanted to go away to school. She wanted to go to DePauw University outside of Indianapolis which was smaller than her high school. She just fell in love with it. We wanted her to go to St. Olaf because it was close. We were just so worried about her depression. She did well. We ended up saying, “Okay, you can go to DePauw.”

She did well there the first year, but then she started cutting herself. I went down there. She ended up in the hospital. Let me back up. After cutting herself we get a call that she was in the emergency room. She had taken a bottle and a half of Tylenol, which is significant—liver issues. She was in the ICU. They had washed her stomach out with charcoal. They thought it was a suicide attempt. It may have been. She said, “I can’t say for sure if it was a suicide attempt. There was a voice telling me to just keep taking these pills and that’s what I did.” That was very traumatic on us.

Spencer will always say, “You spent more time on her, trying to help her with her depression than you did me with trying to overcome addiction,” which wasn’t at all true. That’s his perception of it. He watched a lot of it because he was with us when that was happening. Shelley got better. She ended up graduating from DePauw. She had to go to summer school. She was upset because she couldn’t walk with her class—that was a big deal for small schools. She came back here and she decided she wanted to go back to school. She had a degree in anthropology, which is something you could really use in finding a job. That was sarcastic. She was really interested in theater. She went back to the U and got a degree in theater.

**AS**: There’s a dog snoring in the background. [laughs] She has a degree in anthropology.

**AP**: Anthropology from DePauw and then the U for theater. Then she discovered that there weren’t a lot of jobs in theater. She went back to Hamline [University] and she’s finished up all her coursework for her master’s in theater education. She’s got her teaching degree. This last half year she taught at the middle school in North Minneapolis. I can’t think of the name of it right now. Now she is has a very serious boyfriend, Jeff.

Her hair is green. I never know what color her hair is going to be. I had a horrible time; she has tattoos all over the place. Here she is. You think my kid Spencer has always been very conservative and worried what people thought of him. She’s out there. She’s always very responsible about drinking and using drugs and everything, very responsible. He’s off the deep end. One thing at least in dealing with addiction, it’s taught me to be very tolerant of Shelley, very approving of what her choices are. Not approving, accepting what her choices are in life. So Spencer’s addiction, while he was in college he had a very bad case of mono. This is probably caused by all the partying.

**AS**: The mono?

**AP**: Yes. His doctor, probably being well meaning at the time, he had a horrible sore throat, prescribed him tons of Percocet.

**AS**: For a sore throat?

**AP**: Because it was so bad.

**AS**: I’ve never heard that for sore throat. Wow.

**AP**: It was at the time he had his first girlfriend. He never dated at all in high school. He was too shy and immature. It was probably his first or second year. He met this girl Cassie who was just absolutely wild. She had no place to go so she wondered if she could stay at our house. I said, “No, no, no.” And then, “Yes.” Her parents wouldn’t allow her back in their home.

**AS**: He was in high school or college?

**AP**: College, this was after he had dropped out. I said, “She can stay in a separate bedroom. I want no interaction between you two sexually, in my house. She has to actively look for a place to live.” She was an alcoholic and we didn’t know it. They would drink and drink. I ended up taking her down to HCMC emergency room, sitting with her when she had these horrible cases of anxiety.

Her parents lived over in Hopkins. Her mom had nothing to do with her. Her dad would come and just be disgusted and walk away. So me, the enabler, would sit with her. I just felt so bad for her. Then those two ended up, Spencer and Cassie, moving to an apartment down near the U. She ended up going off the deep end in an alcoholic craze. The police found her banging on the doors of Ridgedale at eight o’clock on a Saturday morning.

**AS**: Of the shopping mall?

**AP**: Of the shopping mall. Probably two weeks previous to that we were gone, Spencer and Cassie were at our house and she started attacking him. He called the police. She got charged with domestic abuse. After the shopping center thing, Spencer was probably twenty one; we had no business saying this to him. We said, “That’s it. We will not tolerate her being around you.” That was the end of Cassie and Spencer together.

He was clearly abusing alcohol, looking backwards, with her. I’m assuming it probably ended up being pot. Then he told me, a couple years ago, how they would get renewals of the Percocet from the doctor’s prescriptions and take as many as they could. Probably when he was twenty five or twenty six, he had his first bout with appendicitis. He ended up in the hospital. It was so inflamed they couldn’t operate. For pain control they give him Percocet and oxycodone. Sometime between his mono and his appendicitis I figure he probably got addicted to pain meds.

Then he met Jamie and they probably dated for two years. Then he moved in with her at the U. She was a nursing student at the U. She got pregnant in her junior year. Right before—let me backup. I’m trying to think if Aidan was born before or after his second appendicitis attack. I think it must have been right after Aidan was born, more Percocet, more oxycodone. Jamie called us right after Christmas.

**AS**: So Ann you’re looking on your laptop?

**AP**: Which is Spencer’s drug history.

**AS**: You kept a history of this written down.

**AP**: He entered The Retreat. Jamie came to us saying, “Something’s wrong with Spencer. He’s acting weird.” She thought he was addicted to pot, which he probably was. We called The Retreat. We did an intervention, just ourselves with him and Jamie and said, “You’ve got to enter treatment. This is unacceptable.”

**AS**: At this point Aidan is born?

**AP**: Aidan is born. He was born in September 2008. This was in February 2009. He told us that he was only on pot. When I talked to The Retreat, to Mike Kennedy, did you ever know him? He was a nurse anesthetist. He was Shelley’s nurse anesthetist to the doctor when she was born. Shelley’s doctor knew him really well. He became addicted to fentanyl and pain pills, which was very convenient being a nurse anesthetist. He would just open a vein in his leg when he was treating a patient and drain the medication into him. Anyways, he ended up being Spencer’s counselor. He told us, “Make sure it’s only pot. If there’s any pain pills in him he’ll have to go to detox.” We had no idea about the Percocet, we were very naïve.

After three days when he was at The Retreat he started going into withdrawal. They sent him to the Mission to go into detox. He came back and he told us he had taken a couple Suboxone and that’s what he had to detox from. We had no clue what that meant. He did the full thirty days there. They really wanted him to go live in a sober house. He refused to because he didn’t want to be apart from Jamie and Aidan. He did well. He did well for probably six to eight months. Then Jamie could tell that he was withdrawing again and something was wrong. Right before Christmas I remember her calling us to come over to their house because she couldn’t wake him up. We couldn’t wake him up either. We had no idea. He was probably overdosing. Eventually he came to. Then we brought him to Fairview Chemical Dependency for an evaluation. Of course he wouldn’t let us in. He told us, he just thought he should go to outpatient treatment. They recommended Nystrom.

At the same time Jamie had graduated the previous spring. That’s when the nurse’s freeze came on. There were no nursing jobs to be had whatsoever except in a nursing home. She wanted to be a hospital nurse. That was her dream. She applied out of state. The only two hospitals that were hiring then were ones connected with Native American communities because they got grant money. One was in Ellisville, Montana the other was in Casper, Wyoming. She interviewed both; got both jobs but she preferred the Ellisville, Montana job. This was in December, January. Spencer insisted that he move out there with her even though he obviously had an addiction going. He moved out there with her. He detoxed on his own, going out there. Then he did pretty well for a year. He got a job as a landscaper. Then he probably started heroin, I want to say out in Montana. That was 2011. The FDA changed the formula for…

**AS**: Oxycodone.

**AP**: Oxycodone and Percocet.

**AS**: You couldn’t crush it.

**AP**: I bet he became a heroin addict, putting things together, back then. He kept asking us for money. Jamie kept saying, this is July 2011, he wasn’t paying rent. He kept coming up with these weird reasons for needing money from us. Then he started pawning things probably in August of 2011. Then his addiction really got bad. This was all out in Montana. Jamie called us in October saying she found a pop can with some resin in it that wasn’t pot.

**AS**: She was still thinking it was pot at this point?

**AP**: Yes. I think she just got worn out, that she didn’t care what he was doing. She needed somebody to watch Aidan. Then we, in response to that, kept saying, “You’ve got to handle this yourself and do things.” We had no clue.

**AS**: To her?

**AP**: To her. Or, “Kick him out.” I said, “We’ll come and get Aidan. He can’t be in this type of environment.” I ended up in the end of October going out there and getting Aidan and brought him back to Minnesota.

**AS**: Just your grandson, just him?

**AP**: Just him. Spencer said he was going to stay there. He stayed out there until Thanksgiving. We sent him money. His car had died. He probably sold it for drugs. His car had died by then. We sent him money to take the train. Jamie had kicked him out of the house. Then on Thanksgiving Day he said he had to run to an AA meeting.

**AS**: He was here?

**AP**: He was here. He started using. He started pawning from us.

**AS**: He said he had to go to an AA meeting but he wasn’t going to an AA meeting?

**AP**: No, he was using. He pawned all through December 2011. At the same time Dean’s mom was dying.

**AS**: When you say pawn, he was just taking things from the house?

**AP**: Half the stuff we didn’t even know was gone. That was so foreign. We finally figured out he was pawning from us. Dean looked for his drill and he couldn’t find it. “I don’t know what happened to it.” I’m trying to remember.

**AS**: Your mom was dying?

**AP**: Dean’s mom was dying. Dean had to go to Santa Fe to be with her. While he was gone Spencer took all this other stuff. He confessed to me that he was pawning. I threw him out of the house. He spent the night at a friend of his. Then he came back. I let him back in. He ended up going through withdrawal. Then we started talking about treatment options with him. This is right before Christmas.

He had come home from Montana, $40,000 in hospital bills from doctor shopping. He would go saying he had a stomach ache caused by the appendicitis removal. I think there were two hospitals and several clinics there. He had no insurance here. When you become a resident of another state and then come back to Minnesota you have to wait at least three months before you can get medical insurance. He was too old to be on ours. We said, “You can go to the Salvation Army.” Dean took him down. This was right before Christmas.

**AS**: He’d go to the Salvation Army for what?

**AP**: Treatment, Adult Rehabilitation Center near Harbor Lights. Dean had done some volunteer work with it before. He took him down there and started registering him. He just freaked out, he said, “This isn’t my type of environment.” We said, “You’ve got to go somewhere.” He said, “What about The Retreat?” We didn’t have the money, so we borrowed money from my mother. They took him back. Right after Christmas he went there. He lasted a week before he started using. He got kicked out. Then he entered, when he got kicked out of there, that’s when he decided to enter the Salvation Army rehab. He wasn’t too good for that. He used with another resident. That kid was four days from graduating from The Retreat and going into a sober house. So he detoxed at home between The Retreat and the Salvation Army.

**AS**: That’s how he got kicked out of the retreat?

**AP**: Yes, he called his dealer and he came right up there.

**AS**: By this point he’s using heroin?

**AP**: He’s using heroin.

**AS**: Do you guys know this at this point, that he’s using heroin?

**AP**: At this point we know it was heroin. We were totally shocked.

**AS**: What did heroin mean to you and Dean at the time?

**AP**: Heroin meant to me you lived under a bridge and you were from a bad family. You were brought up in a dysfunctional family, not to say that ours wasn’t. Not a mom and a dad living together, graduating from high school and going to college. We were in shock. It took me two years to tell people that he was a heroin addict, my friends. It took me three years to go to Al-Anon. I started with Al-Anon. Then I worked back over to Nar-Anon. How many times has he relapsed? I can’t tell you. He went to Salvation Army. He used. Everybody there uses. Then he was in and out of treatment. Do you want to know the details?

**AS**: Just how many times maybe.

**AP**: He was in Teen Challenge twice, Salvation Army; he went to Fairview five or six times. He went to Unity Hospital and then up to Cambridge to Dellwood. Did Maddie ever go there?

**AS**: Close, but no.

**AP**: He went to someplace in St. Cloud. He ended up living at Serenity Village for a while. Fairview was the most focused. Focus 12 was in St. Cloud. He was at Cornerstone in St. Paul sober living. I think he was in treatment fifteen times.

**DP**: Hi.

**AS**: Hi. Let me pause this.

**DP**: Ann was so frustrated at the end and frustrated with me because I didn’t follow the book. Now that he’s gone, her problem really is should she have been following the book.

**AS**: In what way? What do you mean?

**DP**: No enabling, no help, you’ve got to draw the line, we’re hurting him, you’re not helping him.

**AS**: You’re hurting him by helping him.

**DP**: He needs to help himself. She’s reevaluating whether or not that really…

**AS**: That’s what I’m coming up against. That’s what I’m discovering.

**DP**: Then you say, “Where’s that line that allows you to fudge on this but not on that?” You’ve got to do it case by case.

**AS**: You’ve just got to live with the consequences of whatever happens.

[Break in Recording]

**AS**: You were talking about all these treatments. Fifteen times. How were you feeling as a mom?

**AP**: I was so angry and I kept thinking, “Why isn’t this working? What are we doing wrong?” He was on Suboxone. He was probably on Suboxone two years. I’d always heard how controversial it was. I especially heard at Teen Challenge, “That wasn’t acceptable. If you were really serious about it you should be able to do it without MAT.”

**AS**: Medication assisted treatment.

**AP**: It’s always that bullshit.

**AS**: It’s so macho and has this kind of moral…

**AP**: Stigma to it. I just always felt so inadequate. I think that goes back to having an alcoholic dad and needing to control things and make sure people could survive alright when something bad is happening. I really attribute it to the growth in the Nar-Anon program for helping me discover who me is a lot. Where else did I want to go with this? I felt so much judgement from my oldest sister who said, “This whole family needs to do tough love. That would solve everything if we just did tough love.” My oldest sister is a social worker and very well thought of. How can you say something like that in the profession you’re in? Maybe you’d like to come and say that to my Nar-Anon group and see how that goes over?

**AS**: You’re being judged for helping too much because he keeps going to treatment and relapsing and treatment and relapsing and it’s not working?

**AP**: It’s not working and yet we have a relationship, a strong relationship.

**AS**: You and Spencer?

**AP**: And his dad.

**AS**: You were in some ways working on it together. Can you unpack that a little bit for me? What you mean when you talk about enabling—a re you saying that at that point you felt you were doing too much, or are you saying that other people were telling you you were doing too much for him?

**AP**: Other people were telling me I was doing too much for him. To some degree—this is the odd thing, especially since he’s gone now, doing things to stay close to your child, to have a relationship is so important to me. That’s what you do as family. Because he has a disease like this you’re not supposed to do these things? I really detached from him, especially the last year before he died. I feel guilty about that. I know that’s what you’re supposed to do to protect yourself, but I feel very guilty for that. I never went and saw him the last time he was in treatment. Dean did most of that. Even Jamie and Aidan went and saw him. There’s so much guilt with that.

I’d get so angry at him. I could not control my anger when some facets of addiction would come out. That’s what I’m really trying to work through now, is the teaching some of these things. I don’t know if detachment is necessarily part of the twelve steps. I think it’s grown out of the twelve steps. Part of the teachings that they tell you in different family programs, or different books to help families of addicts is you need to detach. I don’t think that’s right. I know you have to, to some degree, to protect yourself. I look back, should we have turned him into the police even?

**AS**: At what point?

**AP**: When he was stealing from us. We were being financially; I can’t tell you how much stuff we paid for out of pawning. We just couldn’t do it anymore.

**AS**: To get your things back? Because you didn’t want to call the police?

**AP**: Right. Then you feel, “Well, Shelley’s so independent. She was brought up to be very independent. Why isn’t Spencer that way, too?” They’re just two different kids, you know that intellectually. One of the things you feel guilty about, too, is never really realizing that recovery was not working.

**AS**: You feel guilty that you didn’t realize?

**AP**: What do you do in those situations? Do you ship them off to Vancouver where they have a hospital where they allow addicts to continue to use but do it in a safe way? I don’t want to blame anybody, but there is no medical answer for it. Suboxone wasn’t working for him.

**AS**: Did he ever try methadone?

**AP**: Not legitimately, let me put it that way. No, I don’t think he ever did.

**AS**: He was never monitored that way where you have to go in everyday and be drug tested?

**AP**: We talked about it a lot. He was seeing an addiction psychiatrist for the last two or three years. I said, “Why didn’t Dr. Buchanan ever recommend methadone?” Then he saw Dr. Amer previously to that. He said, they just said he wasn’t a good candidate. They thought the Suboxone would be appropriate.

**AS**: Do you think that’s a class designation, or racial and class designation?

**AP**: I don’t know.

**AS**: I feel like it could be.

**AP**: Your daughter and Sean are very successful at it. Although I know Kim says it makes Sean sick a lot. Maddie’s never been sick. There was another couple in our St. Paul, well Tom and Jackie whose daughter was very successful on it. It might be.

**AS**: I feel like it’s a class and race-based decision that maybe people don’t realize their bias for it, or they think methadone is for the underclass.

**AP**: The inner city. That’s the zoning laws. Right in federal law they say they can’t go into the suburbs.

**AS**: Methadone clinics?

**AP**: Yes. I should go back and look at the law because it came up in our urban planning stuff. They have to be within so many miles or feet of a hospital. There’s that methadone clinic up in Brooklyn Park, Valhalla, and Woodbury. Maybe that’s close enough to that Woodbury Hospital. There were some restrictions so they would never locate out in the suburbs. I see that a lot as being with the AIDS epidemic because there was so much prejudice, this was probably in the early ‘80s, about locating them in the suburbs.

**AS**: AIDS hospices.

**AP**: It was a big deal about group homes and where they should be located.

**AS**: There’s a geography of addiction and recovery.

**AP**: Absolutely! I’m surprised nobody has done any, maybe somebody has, but I haven’t seen anything about it. That would be a very interesting study to do. The only reason sober homes are out here now is because if they’re six or less they’re permitted as a right. It’s no different than a single family home. They can’t discriminate. There’s quite a few out here now. Where were we?

**AS**: Let’s go back to where you were with your list of places and where the last few…

**AP**: The last treatment program that he was in was a Fairview Lodging Plus. We had tried to get him in and this was a month before he died.

[Interruption due to the vacuum cleaner]

**AP:** We tried to get him into St. Joe’s right before Christmas. His MA insurance would only permit seven days of treatment.

**AS**: Seven days? Why? Do you think because he’d been in so many times, or what do you think?

**AP**: No, it’s MA Medica. I wrote it down here.

**AS**: So January…

**AP**: He said, “MA Medica would only pay four to seven days of treatment.” I said, “Do you have problems with other types of MA?” He was on MA UCare and then the state dropped UCare and went to, I can’t remember, there are two more. One is Hennepin County, one is not very good. It was only MA Medica that this counselor told me they had problem with. The other MAs they had no problems with thirty days of treatment. I think this is when the Obama Treatment, Chemical Dependency Treatment protocols were rolling out too. There’s probably some confusion between insurance and everything else.

Then we had to go back to Fairview. He did well; he was excited to be there. It was the first time he started talking about what he wanted to do in the future. He got real excited about becoming a counselor in the recovery. He said, “I think I really want to do that.” He even called the U while he was at Fairview to see what it would take to get into that program.

**AS**: This is in the winter?

**AP**: This was in February of this year. Then at Fairview they were going to arrange for a sober house for him to go to. He arranged with River Ridge to go to Glenview Lodge which is here in Minnetonka. They kept him in Fairview another week because he was having problems finding a sober house. When he called River Ridge nobody would answer the phone the day he got out. So I got mad and called them. The person that ran the sober home finally called Spencer back. They talked and they mutually agreed that his sober home experience would be the same as what he’d just been through at Fairview.

Then we had told them about New Heights sober home. It was run by the drummer that is in the church band. Spencer went and looked at it. He said, “This is the first place I really feel comfortable.” He had nothing but good things to say about that sober house. He really liked it. He died Sunday, April 3. He spent Thursday night; he and Jamie took the kids to a movie.

**AS**: Which kids?

**AP**: Aidan and Aidan’s half-sister, Sadie. After Jamie threw Spencer out of the house in Montana she fell in love with this other guy and they got married like three months later. He ended up being a drug addict, too. By the time she found out she was already pregnant with her daughter Sadie, she’ll be three in August. She ended up divorcing this guy. Then she moved back to Minnesota. Here she is.

**AS**: So she’s here now?

**AP**: There’s a picture of her.

**AS**: So go back to when he moves in to this sober house that he liked. How long was he there?

**AP**: He was there three weeks. He liked his roommates. He was going to IOP, intensive outpatient treatment, at New Way. He had been to New Way before. This was three years ago and they really changed. They’ve got new curriculum, new staff. It’s very good from what I hear from many sources. He really liked it. That was so odd about how he died.

**AS**: Is he on any medicine at this point?

**AP**: He’s still on Suboxone. He had just had a meeting with his psychiatrist. He was over; he got his first pass for the weekend to spend time at our house with Aidan. You could see his personality again, everything coming through. Saturday night, the night before he died, he asked me to shave his neck. He had his shirt off. He had just taken a shower and he had gotten a haircut and he didn’t like what they did around the neck. I shaved it and I looked all over to see, nothing. He was just my boy again. I don’t know what happened.

**AS**: Talk about what you know happened between Saturday night and Sunday. Talk about the timeline.

**AP:** Saturday night he had dinner with us. He had gone to New Way on Saturday for a makeup session. He had met this new girlfriend, Maria. I never met her. He had spent the day with her Wednesday. He had hours to make up at New Way on Saturday. He spent Friday night with us, with Aidan. They had a ball. Left to go to New Way, he came back here for dinner. I heard his phone text messaging going off around nine o’clock. He said he had to get back to the sober house by ten, his pass was over. Then we thought he didn’t call on Sunday. He said he was going to call. We didn’t think anything about it. It was probably four in the afternoon. It was a really nice day that Sunday. Spencer was riding the bike with the neighborhood kids here.

**AS**: You mean Aidan?

**AP**: Aidan. The groundskeeper at church came driving up with his girlfriend, we know them fairly well. He’s a former coke addict. He’s a really good friend of Greg’s. He said, “Come in the house I have something terrible to tell you.” I thought he had gotten kicked out of the sober home. Dean and I were both there. He said, “Spencer overdosed and died.” I called my sister Susan to come over right away and Jane. They came over and Claire and then I called Jamie. Then we talked to the medical investigator. She said it was really odd when they found him because there was a needle next to his arm. He was face down in the bathroom. This is the first floor bathroom where everybody is coming and going. They had to jimmy the door open, it was locked. The syringe was half full. She said, “Usually you never find that. They’ve used the whole syringe.” She said, “We also found some vomit on his pillow upstairs. We’re going to do a full autopsy on him.” I had told them he was…

[Interruption due to vacuum cleaner]

**AS**: She was going to go ahead and do a full autopsy.

**AP**: She said, “We also found two packets of heroin in his wallet. We’re able to lift the DNA off of it. We’ve got a cell phone, too. Do you happen to know what his passcode is?”

**AS**: This is the medical examiner?

**AP**: Investigator.

**AS**: Let’s back up. The owner of New Heights sober house comes to your house?

**AP**: No, his friend.

**AS**: A friend of his who knew you from church.

**AP**: Greg had called Dean’s cell phone and couldn’t get ahold of us. Greg is the owner of the house. He didn’t know how to get a hold of us when we didn’t have our cell phones. That’s why he called his friend from our church. They were able to find our address. He came over and told us, he and his girlfriend.

**AS**: Were you two alone? Was Aidan here?

**AP**: Aidan was here, he was out riding the bike. We were just goofing around with him. When they told us, some neighbor must have watched him; I have no idea who was taking care of him while this was going on. We called my sisters and then talked to the medical investigator. Then they wondered if we had the passcode to Spencer’s phone. Aidan had given it to me right before Christmas because we had suspected that he was using. We knew he was using.

**AS**: Aidan told you what the passcode was?

**AP**: Spencer’s phone had some of his games on it. Aidan gave us the passcode. They were able to get in his phone and go back and do the trace of telephone numbers, trying to find a person of interest. That’s those emails I showed you. That’s all we know right now. He lived with us the last two years. He probably was clean maybe six months. The way I figure it he probably started using again last summer. Benzos, heroin, pot, I don’t know what but he was using something other than heroin. We had to call the police twice to come and get him because he was acting so goofy.

**AS**: Goofy or violent?

**AP**: He was waving around and we wanted to take him to the hospital. He wouldn’t go with us to the emergency room. He was just waving all over the place. He could barely stand, could barely talk. The first time the police took him to Fairview detox. They used a seventy-two hour hold. “No problem at all based on our interview with him.” At one thirty that morning we get a call from some kid down at the U who’s found him walking along the light-rail tracks. So Fairview released him. He had obviously had his stomach pumped. I don’t know what he took. When I get his medical records, I haven’t done that yet. Christmas Eve it was just disgusting. Right before church…

**AS**: This past Christmas Eve?

**AP**: He had previously used. He just went down like a pancake in the pew. You know how packed it usually is. We had the whole family over here, cousins, nieces, nephews. He had obviously used again and Jamie and the kids, everybody was here. He would refuse to go upstairs. We couldn’t bodily take him up, we weren’t strong enough. He just sat there. My whole family was exposed to him. I said, “This is just what addiction is. This is what they act like.” Dean and I said, “Let’s just forget about being bothered by it.” This is what the disease manifests itself as. At one point he was sitting next to my niece and said, “I don’t want to be this way at all. I’m so sorry. I just don’t want to be this way.”

He always wanted to go into treatment. He never fought it. Probably two years ago, we had to throw him out. He lived on the streets for a couple months. Maybe not even that long. He got beat up. He finally called and said, “I’m ready to go to treatment.” As a mom I just know that he wasn’t going to recover. I had his funeral planned out in my head for at least the last year, maybe even the last two years, Amy. It was tearing Dean and I apart. I felt bad as a mother not being able to protect my marriage from that. Dean felt bad and I always would get upset with Dean because he was such an enabler. But is that so wrong with what happens? Then I have felt tremendous guilt because we don’t have to deal with the ramifications of heroin use anymore. I can’t tell you what that feels like to not have to have that constant worry, that constant pain all the time. We have the pain of not having him.

**AS**: So you feel guilty that you’re relieved?

**AP**: Yes.

**AS**: But being relieved means that your son is no longer in your life.

**AP**: I remember the first time going back to Nar-Anon. I was walking out the door after, I think it was Christy, but she said, “I felt so bad for you. Everybody went around the circle and here you don’t have your son anymore.” But what I was feeling was that I’m so glad I don’t have to go through what they’re going through anymore. I felt always so inadequate in dealing with it; I thought I worked enough of them at home. I know that some of these processes are—I was so totally confused with Rule 25, never having to deal with that. What you do, getting so many conflicting answers? I’d get so frustrated with the people I would talk to on the phone who would use acronyms for everything and think you knew. I was supposed to know what that meant and I didn’t. I was so frustrated in dealing with the insurance, trying to get ahold of the right person. So frustrated with dealing with counselors at different rehab facilities and knowing what they put in to try to help. What they give, the gifts they have.

**AS**: But you were frustrated with them?

**AP:** Because I couldn’t get them to understand what he was going through. I guess it all comes down to that I know so little about addiction but I know so much about it. It’s so confusing to me. As a mom I would never want any mother to go through this, even living through it with your child still being alive. In fact, I think it’s almost worse, unless they’re in successful recovery.

**AS**: Even then it’s always on your back.

**AP**: It’s always in the back of your mind. You’re never going to get rid of that feeling. I want to do something and I get angry. It’s the anger, I felt so numb and angry these last three months since he’s died. I’m angry because I can’t remember the good parts of it. I’m so angry about the addiction parts of him. I felt so numb. I said, “How could this have happened?” Look at those pictures. How could that be? That a disease could be that insidious. I often felt like, especially the last six months when he went off the deep end with using again, he’s dead but his body is still working. Like a zombie.

**AS**: At what point would you say you started to detach from him? Was it like the last six months, back in the fall?

**AP**: Yes. Even before then. It was at least in August because I remember I was seeing a therapist at Hazleton. We had gone through all these different techniques. She said, “I just don’t see that you need to see me anymore.” Dean and I went back and I knew I had to break my ties with her, being an individual therapist, when Dean and I went to her. Dean and Spence and I went to therapy in the fall and, this is off the tape, just this nincompoop.

**AS**: We’ve had plenty of people talk about their inadequate professional support.

**AP**: Spencer there, “Don’t you realize he’s using?” We’re sitting in a family therapy session.

**AS**: At a renowned institution for recovery.

**AP**: “Can’t you see the signs? Can’t you pull him out of this?” Then Dean and I started seeing her.

**AS**: Not the same person? Or the same person?

**AP**: The same person I saw. Not the one for the three of us. The good one. I just love her. She was able to get through with Dean about how this enabling was not helping. Then looking back, I’ve had many conversations with the director of the family program at The Retreat now about this issue between when you’ve lost somebody, enabling, and detachment. They still don’t believe in MAT over at The Retreat.

**AS**: I think we’re on the brink of change, at least some people I’ve talked to say we’re on the brink of change with it. You want to keep the addict alive as long as you can in hopes that they will recover. The bottom with opioids is death. There’s no coming up from that. Can you go back a little bit about feeling; I wonder if last fall when you were so frustrated and angry with him, do you think that you just kind of maxed out? That you just became so worn down and exhausted by the addiction that you had to detach to just maintain your sanity?

**AP**: Yes.

**AS**: I don’t want to put words in your mouth. Before you jump ahead to enabling and the kind of critique of that, what was that like for you as a mother to get to that point? It’s years of addiction, it’s fifteen treatments.

**AP**: What got me to that point? I really started buying into the Twelve-Step program. I really felt really tied in to, there’s nothing I can do to change this. I’m just going to take the fourth step out of here. I truly believe that in order for me to get healthy and to survive this I needed to rely on my higher power. I started becoming very spiritual again and did a lot of reading on spiritualness; I read a lot of Karen Hesse’s stuff. Really reading about not being able to deal with another person’s addiction. Her book, hearing her speak, just attending and doing more step work myself and thinking about it and doing more readings. I just knew I had to rely, for me, on God, my higher power.

I almost had an epiphany, I remember one day I woke up in the morning and I just felt, I knew it was black and white: there’s nothing I can do about this anymore. There’s absolutely nothing I can do. It took me a long, long time to get there. Mothering doesn’t work, nothing, there’s nothing I can do that’s stronger than heroin and what it does to my son. The only thing stronger than me is God. I thought if I can survive his death. I knew that’s what it was going to be, I’m just going to have to give in to God. I think that’s when I felt detached. Then I couldn’t do anything. I have to let God do his will with Spencer.

**AS**: Was there a little bit of peace in that?

**AP**: Yes, there was a lot of peace in that. I hear messages coming from the outside. That’s where you should feel guilty as a mom. You couldn’t be part of that peace. I’m not explaining this very well. I had no part in it anymore. It was between Spencer and his higher power, or my God. I knew there was nothing I could do. That’s hard for a mom to say that.

**AS**: It’s the opposite of how we’re trained and raised and feel.

**AP**: I was kind of a controlling person. Hopefully I’m not that much anymore. That’s kind of the way I was brought up to be, I had to be controlling. I have no regrets about doing everything I was able to do. I have no regrets that way at all. I did too much or a lot. I know there was nothing more I could do. I have great peace with that. I have trouble remembering him before without drugs. That’s what I have to work on in this next time, getting over the numbness and the anger of that.

**AS**: Do the pictures of him as a child help?

**AP**: This is the first time since the funeral that I’ve brought them out.

**AS**: Thank you for sharing them.

**AP**: Shelley said, “Mom, you’ve really got to look at these to make sure they’re okay before we put them out.” The last seven years I had to look at those pictures, some obviously he was using. I wanted to make sure there weren’t any obviously using pictures there. I had recorded on my phone with him right before Christmas, of him flopped over on the couch, passed out from using, his head in his cereal bowl.

**AS**: You had taken pictures of that?

**AP**: It helped for me to look at that. That might perpetuate the anger. I don’t know how I feel about that right now. I’m trying to think of what else.

**AS**: I wanted to ask you something and now I just completely forgot.

**AP**: I joined these other; they’re primarily mom sites, closed Facebook pages for parents or loved ones of addicts that are dead. One is Grass, which is a national organization that doesn’t have a chapter in Minnesota. It’s a Twelve-Step program for moms or anybody who’s lost a loved one. It’s primarily mothers. It’s just so disgusting to look at, but it’s a very healthy site for people to vent.

**AS**: Why is it disgusting? Because so many people have lost their children?

**AP**: Yes, so many women or moms can’t get over it. I should show you some of the posts from it. You probably can’t get on it. Then there’s another one with Compassionate Friends, it’s the same way. I find there’s little support for people like me in the Twin Cities. There’s Gloria’s group, but Dean can’t stand her.

**AS**: I know what I was going to ask you. You and Dean, what I heard is that you went to the sober house after Spencer died. Can you talk about why you did that? What happened, just for this record? What made you do that, what did you say and how was it received?

**AP**: I still don’t even know what time Spencer died at. It says so on the death certificate, it says two in the afternoon, but he probably died before that. When Greg couldn’t get ahold of us, after we talked to the medical investigator we talked to Greg. Greg told us that he was not in the house when Spencer died. He was coming back from his church. He didn’t get there until one. All the residents there were traumatized. There were about twenty vehicles and it was cornered off. The police investigators had interviewed about eight of them. He said, “I don’t know what to do about this. I’ve got all these traumatized people.” I said, “We can come over and talk to them.” Greg said, “Would you?”

Dean and Shelley and I went over there Monday night, the day after Spencer died, which is when they always have their group meetings. It was packed. We told them what we had been through and told them how we felt and told them how happy Spencer was at the sober house. How thankful he was that he was there. We told them not to give up hope, there’s so much hope in recovery. Everybody was crying. This beautiful girl, she was absolutely gorgeous, was just sobbing. Saying, “I feel so bad for what I put my parents through.” So many of them said that. A lot of these people that live in the sober home parents have disowned them because of the addiction and the collateral damage with addiction. It was very soothing for Dean and I to hear the outreach that they gave. Several of them came up to us afterwards and told us how much they liked Spencer, how kind he was and what a compassionate person he was, which was really helpful to me. That’s how we brought him up to be. Then I had to have the person that found him show me everything and show me how he was laying when he was found. I had to have his roommate show me his room. I laid down in his bed to see what he would see when he was alive. All this is helpful.

**AS**: Do you want to go inside so we can get Kleenex?

**AP**: Oh yes. We’ve been back a couple times now. I met a woman there, it was probably two or three weeks ago, that came up to me and said she went in to Fairview the same time that Spencer did. They developed a friend relationship. She just wanted me to know what impact Spencer had on her. She said, “I just remember Jamie and Aidan had just come back from his Boy Scout meeting. He was in his little Boy Scout outfit running around Fairview Recovery Plus floor.” Just hearing those things, I only can think of, sometimes I don’t want to hear stories from his friends from after high school because he stole from them or did something. All I’ve heard is bad the last seven years just to hear something good is just so nice.

**AS**: What did you do at his funeral? You talked about how it took you two or three years to tell people that your son was an addict. I think something changed in you by the time of his funeral.

**AP**: Yes. We wanted J. R., our pastor, to be very open about addiction. You were gone.

**AS**: I was out of town.

**AP**: I can give you a CD of it if you want.

**AS**: Yes.

**AP**: It’s up to you. It was a very kind of addiction based sermon. We just said we didn’t want to sugar coat anything about his life, but we want to celebrate his life. He had very good parts of his life. He had a wonderful life until addiction took over. It was kind of two parts. We had his good friend John talk. John talked a lot about the younger days and growing up and knowing what struggles Spencer went through. Then Greg the sober home guy, he spoke too about addiction. There were a lot of people from his sober home in attendance. I think four pews were filled with our people.

**AS**: From Nar-Anon?

**AP**: Yes. Several of his high school friends attended and said, “We just knew what a good guy Spencer was before drugs took over. That’s the memories we have of him.” I don’t know how many people; there were a lot of people there. At the end, J. R. just gave; we gave the hands on the back kind of thing and said the serenity prayers in closing. That was very powerful. J. R. gets so pissed off.

**AS**: This is your pastor?

**AP**: Our pastor. This is the third heroin death since January.

**AS**: The third?

**AP**: Third or fourth. Our church always hosts the stuff with The Retreat about recovery stuff.

**AS**: What church is it that you go to?

**AP**: It’s Wayzata Community, it’s a UCC church. The only reason we started going there is because of Spencer’s addiction. A friend of mine goes, says, “You should come to the service with me. It’s so calm and soothing.” Then I met the building and grounds guy there, who’s a former addict.

**AS:** He ends up being friends with the sober house director.

**AP:** He knew Spencer because when Spencer worked landscaping that church was one of the places they had accounts. It’s connecting the dots. It was a very open; we didn’t want to cover up anything about addiction. Dean and I and Shelley have grown so much being open about it. We didn’t want Spencer’s death to be anything different from cancer or diabetes or anything else or have any stigma attached to it. There’s no reason not to talk about addiction as part of a celebration of a life event.

**AS**: Aidan is how old?

**AP**: Seven.

**AS**: How is he doing? What does he know about the cause of his father’s death?

**AP**: We’ve tried to stay age appropriate with him. We’ve always told him since he was about three that his dad had a brain disease. When he died we told him that he died in his sleep. I mean he wasn’t asleep I guess technically. Aidan has been very quiet about his dad’s death. We’ve been, every occasion we’re with him, we tell Spencer stories, funny stories. He loves hearing that. I went to his end of the year first grade picnic and started talking to one of his best friend’s dads. He said, “This kid just told me that Aidan’s dad died this morning. I knew a kid in his class’s dad died. I didn’t know it was Aidan’s died.” I said, “What did he tell you he died of?” “Brain disease.” It was that morning that this little kid told his father. I said, “Well, that’s what we told him, but it was a heroin overdose.” The little kid’s dad is a special ed teacher at Minnetonka High School and deals a lot with kids who have had terrible anxiety either through relative’s addiction, their parents, or them dealing with it themselves. He totally got it. It was good having that conversation with him.

We told his Boy Scout leaders the true cause. I don’t know how to. Jamie’s got the name of all these child psychiatrists, but she doesn’t feel the need to call them yet. That’s probably okay. His teacher at school, he’s had a male first grade teacher that has been very good for him. He’s been wonderful. I don’t know what to think. Now I feel, I see Dean, we’re parenting his son. I don’t know if that’s such a good idea. We’re being more than grandparents.

**AS**: How so? Is he staying with you?

**AP**: He stays with us like every three weekends because Jamie has to work those weekends. We try to help her out throughout daycare and financially we’re helping him. Although one of the best things we ever did was take out life insurance policies on the kids when they were babies. We’ve been paying them up every year. I would recommend that Maddie and Brandon take out an insurance policy. I think we paid twenty-four dollars a month for years. I thought we stopped paying it but we didn’t. Then now Aidan has Social Security. Spencer was never able to financially support Aidan, very rarely. We were always doing it. It’s good what he couldn’t provide in life he can provide in death now for his son. Part of the mothering or grandmothering is we have to take care of Aidan. We want to.

**AS**: Why are you kind of critical of that?

**AP**: It gets back to that damn enabling thing. Am I enabling Jamie? We’re helping her. I don’t know. I just want to get that word out of my vocabulary, that detachment right now.

**AS**: I’m not a fan of them now. Not after my tenth interview with mothers, you being number ten today. I’m not seeing the benefit.

**AP**: I’ve never heard anything or read anything about mothering when your child dies. Enabling and detachment aren’t a good thing.

**AS**: No, they don’t help us.

**AP**: Have you heard other mothers say that?

**AS**: Yes, many. It seems to me there’s a continuum somehow, there’s like a measured kind of—I’m just thinking this out loud. When you get to a point mothering your addict child that you’ve done everything you feel you can possibly do then you have to save yourself and realize that your child has to figure this out on their own. That’s where that pop psychology idea of enabling and codependency comes in. As parents we are codependent. We’re dependent, our children are depending on us for their lives, and addiction just throws that whole thing into this strange… It’s like a hall of mirrors in a way for parents.

In any other disease or disorder or mental illness, however you want to think about addiction, doing everything we can is completely and utterly acceptable and expected. For some reason when we get into Twelve-Step program and this whole codependency thing, I think a lot of it comes from Al-Anon and spouses of addicts—that whole movement. Doing the care work of your beloved addict, you become part of the problem instead of looking at addiction as the problem, lack of resources, lack of treatment, lack of money, lack of knowledge about addiction is the problem. It’s not the mothers and fathers wanting to help their children live to the other side of addiction. That’s where I’m really, really thinking hard about this because it’s not working. Yet, when I ask my daughter, she will say, “It had nothing to do with you, Mom. Thank you for not giving up on me, but you could not have stopped me.” That’s the in between space that we need to talk more about.

**AP**: Going back to the comment about forcing or allowing them to make decisions on their own. I feel that the disease robbed Spencer of the development of his frontal lobe. So that he couldn’t reach that point. He did make a comment when he was living on the streets, when we threw him out, that that made him realize he needed treatment. That was the best thing for him when we threw him out. It didn’t change him to grow anymore and develop breaks in his brain or other things that the frontal lobe produces. I don’t know that much about the brain science just what I’ve been taught. He could never survive that. He could never develop those skills and make a turn around.

**AS**: He needed to be in sustained recovery for a very long time for that to happen. Was he thirty-five?

**AP**: Thirty-four. Tomorrow he’ll be thirty-five.

**AS**: Tomorrow is Spencer’s birthday.

**AP**: Earth Day is what I’m calling it.

**AS**: That’s lovely, Ann.

**AP**: That’s when he came to earth.

**AS**: Should we stop?

**AP**: Yes.

**AS**: Thank you.

**AP**: This has been so helpful to me.

**AS**: Your courage and your willingness to talk to me so fresh in grief, I just want to say I was not going to ask you.

**AP**: Why?

**AS**: Well, I was going to ask you months ago when I decided I was going to do this. When he died I realized, “I’m not going to bother her.” Then you came back to Nar-Anon so quickly and I was getting to the end of my interviews and I thought, “If she’s at the meeting tonight I’m going to ask her.” As a document in this moment that freshness of the grief is so powerful. I’m so grateful to you for being willing to talk about it and be so honest. Starting the Nar-Anon that you did two years ago, our connection in the St. Paul group, all of that has been, you’ve just been a really incredible force for a lot of people to feel at home in this turmoil that we live in.

**AP**: I need to keep coming back. Sometimes I feel like I don’t fit there anymore. I need to be there. I’d like to ask Barbara. Did you interview Barbara?

**AS**: No. The one who came to our group right before Spencer died, who lost her son?

**AP**: Lost her son three years ago. I haven’t talked to her about this issue and I wanted to explore that.

**AS**: Which issue? About enabling?

**AP**: Enabling and detachment and everything. I guess I need to think about this some more.

**AS**: She’s also three years out and you’re three months out.

**AP**: Anyways, I don’t know if I told you, The Retreat is finally having a grief support group. It’s starting August 20. I don’t even know where to post it. I was going to post it on our Facebook page. They’re for people like me. I’m really curious to see how they’re going to; it’s a Twelve-Step grief support, to see how that goes.

**AS**: Maybe just go and see if you like it before you start posting about it.