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An Editorial on the Need for Intervention Within the Criminal and Drug Courts: Love Over Life Lost

My dad is a drug addict and a twice-convicted felon. His addiction and incarceration weighed heavily on my family. It was our dirty secret. The first time my dad went to jail, my late grandmother didn't want me to know the truth. She thought telling me that my dad started a new job in Indiana would be easier to swallow. My mother disagreed. I learned the whole painful history of his drug abuse starting back in middle school. While I was grateful my mom trusted me with the truth, she didn't trust anyone else with that knowledge. Encouraging me not to tell anyone because they wouldn't understand and they would use the information to judge us. Given that I grew up in a rural, conservative town, I knew she was right. In that moment, something shifted deep inside; I was suddenly embarrassed and ashamed of my dad. I was also livid with him. How could he do this to himself, to us, to me? Why wouldn't he talk to me about it?

I didn't understand it at the time, but I have since learned about the cyclical nature of society's current approach to addiction: arrest, incarceration, release, repeat. My dad didn't receive any counseling or treatment while imprisoned. He wasn't healing. He was just treading water until he got out and got a fix. After my dad was released from his second stint, we finally talked about all of it - jail, the drugs, the shame. It was the most shockingly painful and revealing conversation I have ever had with my dad. It was the first and only time I ever saw him cry. He sobbed while he explained that he wanted to promise me he would never use again, and how he knew it would be a lie. It was the first time in a long time that I saw my dad as a vulnerable human being. He had been a monster in my mind for so long. Once that cloud of old anger cleared, I realized how I had bought into all the social stigma and baggage that comes with having a drug addict in the family. It was time for a different approach for me and for my family. I invested a lot of time learning about drugs, what they do to the human brain, and treatment options. In short, drug addiction is a serious, life-long disease. It cannot be cured, it can only be managed. Given the astonishing estimate of addicts in this country, I started to wonder why drug addiction is shrouded in secrecy and shame when other diseases have fundraisers, marathons, and ad campaigns searching for a cure. How will we ever create a place of honest healing if we can't even talk about the disease of drug addiction openly? One brave day, I decided I had enough of the secrets, unburdening myself to a close friend. The Earth did not open up and swallow me whole. Rather, I had an honest and intense conversation that left us both a little sad, but the relief was palpable. The kindness of my friend helped me realize that we need to cultivate a culture of empathy for drug addicts. The shame isn't working for anyone.

I don't believe anyone aspires to be a drug addict. My dad certainly didn't. He was once a very talented machinist in the car racing world. With a little empathy, drug addiction doesn't have to be a dirty personal, family or societal secret anymore. I say this loudly and without shame: my dad is a drug addict, and I love him.