Heroin Overdose Claims Life of ACR Health Employee

24-year-old Kevin Parker died of a drug overdose on July 15, 2016. He left behind a two-year-old son and a mother, Donna Beaudoin, who wrote from her heart when she penned her son’s obituary.

“Kevin was a caring, smart, and funny young man who worked at helping others and was destined for greatness. Sadly, he suffered from an addiction, a disease which took his life. He struggled for the past 2 years and had worked so hard to maintain a constant presence in his son, Kaleb James Parker’s, life. The disease knows no social boundaries, economic status, or prejudice. Yet the demons he battled within himself proved to be greater than he.”

Kevin’s death was a shocking loss to his family and also to us, his co-workers at ACR Health. Kevin started with ACR Health as a volunteer, became a Peer Educator, and then was hired as a Peer Navigator who worked directly with clients, helping them to acquire medical assistance and support. “He loved his job because he loved to help people,” his mother said. Kevin’s life had been on an upswing. He had a job he liked, co-workers who were friends, and his own apartment.

Donna had moved to Texas last November for her job, but was in contact with her son nearly every day. On Wednesday, July 13, they talked as usual. He was happy, cracking jokes. But when Donna hung up the phone, she said a bad feeling settled over her.

A long distance dread. She couldn’t sleep that night and the first thing next morning she called Kevin, but there was no answer.

Since his passing, Donna has tried to make sense of her son’s heroin overdose. A nurse by training, she understood his son’s struggle. Kevin was an addict, she said. But heroin was not his first drug of choice. Kevin was ordered into rehab when he was caught in possession of a controlled substance, Xanax, in his car. He spent nine months in a halfway house. He had struggled with Xanax, but felt he had arrived at a point where he knew how to stay safe.

Donna made addiction a focal point of Kevin’s obituary because she wanted to take a public stand about drug addiction – especially if it would help to save the lives of other people’s children. “Heroin will grab you and you will be addicted the first time you use it. They say the high is like no other. If you use it once and you are able to walk away, you think you can do it again. And the next time perhaps you are dead within 15 minutes.”

What advice does she have for other parents? That’s a hard one, she said because what she did didn’t work. She gave it 100%. Kevin was loved as a child and as a grown son. He could talk to his mother and he knew how to get help. Everything she could have done for Kevin, she did.

Continued on page 3
Opening Doors

ACR Health’s Board of Directors and leadership have just completed a thoughtful, reflective process to update our Mission, Vision, and Values Statements. It was a very necessary updating as ACR Health has grown in every imaginable way: number of programs, size of workforce, territory served, new lines of business, and a new epidemic (heroin) to address. Yet through all the changes we have stayed close and true to our original purpose: to take care of people who have HIV/AIDS and to do everything in our power to stop the spread of this killer disease.

From that starting point, we apply the same dedication and purposefulness to the work we do today. ACR Health’s new Mission is:

To create healthy communities by opening doors to services that enhance the wellbeing of all.

To me “Opening Doors” is at the heart of what we do. People who need assistance know that they can come to us. If we don’t directly offer the service they need, we know exactly who does. We make that call; secure that spot in a treatment facility; set up that appointment; do the test for HIV or Hepatitis C; enroll in that insurance program; supply that syringe or Narcan training; see you in our medical clinic. If you have HIV we will open the doors that get you where you need to go and teach you how to keep your loved ones safe.

ACR Health’s Vision is:

A community in which every person has the opportunity to achieve optimal health and equality.

This vision has empowered me every day of the more than 20 years I have worked with ACR Health. Just imagine optimal health and equality across the board – for everyone.

ACR Health’s Values reflect how we treat each other as well as those we serve. We believe in:

- Commitment to Excellence
- Respect for People and Community
  - Wellbeing
  - Integrity
  - Empowerment
  - Teamwork

These words inspire us to do our best work; to affirm people’s inherent worth; and to open the doors that help them live better lives. As ACR Health implements this new mission, vision, and values I look also to my past for inspiration. The tragedy of AIDS and the fight to defeat it started me on this path, and the real probability that we can end AIDS in New York by 2020 is incredible and exhilarating.
Donna said there is always a reason why someone would want to alter their reality. “Why would you want to put an unknown substance in your body? Look at who’s doing it. A well-adjusted, happy person doesn’t just decide to snort coke or shoot heroin. Own it. There’s a reason, whether depression, anxiety, or a dare. There’s something hurting inside.”

At ACR Health, Kevin’s loss was both personal and professional. He’d made good friends with many of his co-workers, people who work daily with those struggling with substance abuse. “To me, Kevin was always the man with the million dollar smile,” said Prevention Health Advocate Johanna Johnson. “He had a spark for helping anyone and everyone.”

ACR Health is a judgment-free zone. He could have come to his co-workers or otherwise reached out for help. “He has given me more of a reason now to fight harder to get the message of addiction out into the community we serve,” said Johanna, “and to educate more individuals so that this epidemic can come to an end.”

Kevin was believed to have been alone in his apartment when he injected the fatal dose of heroin. Isolation or the desire for privacy can have deadly consequences when drugs are involved. Following Kevin Parker’s death, Executive Director Wil Murtaugh told a gathering of ACR Health staff, “The most important message to those who use injection drugs is DO NOT USE ALONE. There is no one to call 911 and get help. There is no one trained to use naloxone, the heroin rescue drug. There is no shame in reaching out for help.”

Murtaugh said the growing number of people dying from drug overdoses is reminiscent of the early days of the AIDS crisis. “People would come to volunteer with us and within a few months they would die of AIDS. Opioid overdose is like that now it seems, with people dying nearly every day. The difference is that there was nothing you could do about AIDS in the early days. With heroin you have a choice. We can help you stay healthy and reduce your risk of getting HIV or Hepatitis C, and when you are ready to get into treatment, we can get you placed. Until then, DO NOT USE ALONE.”

Recovery is a personal choice. When you are ready to change direction, we’ll help you. No strings attached. 800.475.2430
If someone you know uses injection drugs, learn how to use the overdose reversal drug naloxone. Call 800.475.2430 or Narcan@ACRHealth.org. For more information about Narcan, see the story on page 6.

International Overdose Awareness Day

On Wednesday, August 31, 2016, thousands of people across the country and around the world commemorated International Overdose Awareness Day. For many it was a day of grieving for those lost to accidental drug overdose.

For ACR Health, August 31 was a day of outreach and training, with 15 Narcan training events planned, with at least one event in each of the nine counties served by ACR Health.

The major challenge of Overdose Awareness Day is: with 120 overdose deaths per day in the U.S., how do we come back from the opioid and heroin crisis now gripping our nation? Our answer is through “Harm Reduction.” Programs such as Syringe Exchange and the Safety First Medical Clinic in Syracuse assist injection drug users to keep them healthy, free of HIV and Hepatitis C, while educating them about limiting their risks and helping to place them in treatment facilities when they are ready to make a change. We reduce harm by ensuring that people who use drugs and their loved ones have access to information, tools and support without judgment, stigma, or fear of arrest.
A Welcome Invitation in the North Country, as ACR Health was asked to participate in the Mohawk Nation’s Annual Wellness Day event at Akwesasne on July 21. The concern for Mohawk Nation Health officials is viral Hepatitis C infection, the most common chronic blood borne infection in the United States and, according to the CDC, is now killing more people than HIV. Mohawk Health officials want their people to have a way to be tested and to receive treatment if they are positive. ACR Health offers rapid HCV testing that delivers preliminary results in twenty minutes. The OraQuick® HCV Rapid Antibody Test uses a drop of blood from a finger stick. All ACR Health testing services are free.

ACR Health Community Prevention Coordinator for Northern New York, Julia LaVere reports that they met with five individuals, three of whom were tested for Hepatitis C. “We will be providing peer training classes on Akwesasne in order to have some peers for prevention education and peer delivered syringe exchange program,” said LaVere. “We hope the July meeting is the beginning of a new health relationship between ACR Health and the Mohawk people.”

A Sister’s Fight to End AIDS

Families never forget. It’s been 30 years since Tamara Charette’s brother, Alfie Avallone, died of AIDS. Yet every year she faithfully gathers a group of her friends and walks in the First Frost AIDS Walk/Run in memory of her handsome and gentle brother who worked as a chef in New York City and loved traveling.

Alfie was very discreet about his private life and sexuality until he became ill with HIV during the 1980’s. He finally told his parents that he was gay but kept his illness a secret until he was admitted to a New York City hospital. “Our parents got a call from one of his friends to tell them Alfie was admitted,” said Tamara. “The friend said he was being treated poorly at this hospital because he had AIDS, so the next day, my parents made a bed for him in the back of their van, drove six hours to the city, signed him out of the hospital, and brought him home.”

Alfie’s mother was a nurse and took good care of him at home during his last few months. “After his passing, my mother had a hard time finding an undertaker to take his body, but she found one in the town where my brother was born...and the funeral home treated him with respect and dignity.”

Now that medications are working better and people can live with fewer complications from HIV, some young people think it is no big deal to get HIV. What does Tamara say to them? “My mother died a few years after my brother passed. It took a lot out of her losing her child, and then with a broken heart, she lost her battle with cancer.

“If anything, I would tell young people to think of their parents, family, and friends and how Alfie’s death affected my family when you think of HIV as no big deal. What if they couldn’t get the medication that keeps them alive? Would it be a big deal then? I will continue to make my brother and my father and mother proud and work to defeat HIV/AIDS.”

On the Northern Front

ACR Health at Akwesasne

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Participants in ACR Health’s Bubble Blast Run created a rousing splash Sunday morning as they swarmed the foamy obstacle course that wound throughout the fairgrounds. Fair goers, “carnies”, and restaurant row workers all joined in cheering on the Bubble runners. Once again, there were smiles were everywhere as the runners conquered the bubbly course.

Bubble Blast Run, a sudsy, squeaky clean foam obstacle course that featured an endless stream of bubbles and such “obstacles” as the Human Washing Machine and the Sudsy Slip and Slide provided family-centered fun for everyone. “New York State has a tradition of being inclusive, of welcoming everyone under its big tent, the same as ACR Health,” said Deputy Executive Director of Operations, Carrie Portzline-Large. “Our message, and that of our Q Centers and youth programming, is that everyone matters; everyone is welcome here.”

The Bubble Blast Run supports ACR Health’s Adolescent Health Initiative which equips teens to make good decisions about issues that affect their life and health; and the Q Centers, now located in Syracuse, Watertown, and Utica, which provide a safe, nurturing space for LGBTQ youth, their allies and parents to find support, prevention education and educational support, including monetary awards for college bound youth.

“This race brings together the best of New York and that includes the state’s policies on equality,” said Q Center Development Manager Maureen Harrington O’Neill. “The Bubble Blast benefits youth – all youth – and reminds us that everyone should be valued, period. We would like to thank the hard working staff of the Great New York State Fair, and acting director Tony Waffner, for making inclusion an important part of the new fair’s tradition. Events like the Bubble Blast Run, especially in a welcoming venue like the Great New York State Fair, allow us to let everybody know about the services the Q Centers at ACR Health offer and give us a way to help pay for them.”

The Great New York State Fair’s official running event, the Bubble Blast Run, could not have been possible without help from our sponsors: AIC Talent Solutions, Gianelli, More With Print, Empower, and media sponsors 93Q and Fox 68.
“More Americans now die from drug overdoses than car crashes, and these overdoses have hit families from every walk of life and across our entire nation.”

Health and Human Services Secretary Sylvia M. Burwell

Heroin overdoses are heartbreaking for the families left behind. As local communities struggle with the heroin crisis, ACR Health has put Narcan (naloxone) directly into the hands of people who regularly come into contact with those who use heroin and opioid prescription painkillers. Properly trained, they can inject naloxone in the event of an overdose and reverse the effects.

ACR Health has provided this life-saving training to firefighters, police officers, families and loved ones of injection drug users, and the general public, all without a source of funding to cover our costs.

The state has stepped up with at $15,000 grant to ACR Health’s Criminal Justice Initiative (CJI) to train what is arguably the most at-risk population in the state: those newly released from New York Correctional Facilities.

ACR Health’s Criminal Justice Initiative provides comprehensive HIV, STD, and Hepatitis prevention programs for inmates while they are incarcerated, and works individually with inmates to develop transitional plans for health care, risk reduction, and services upon release from prison. Now they will be trained how to use naloxone for opioid overdose reversal. The chance that newly released individuals who engaged in opioid use prior to incarceration resuming use or being in the company of others who use, is very high according to CJI Prevention Health Advocate, Drew Pearson.

“People are sent back to where they came from, the place where they got in trouble in the first place. Very often it was drugs that got them arrested.” Pearson said that most individuals intend to stay clean, but their abstinence in prison was forced and not a choice. “The issues they came in with they leave with; and the way they coped – drugs – is often what they return to.”

Many also return to their old dose of heroin thinking they can handle it, but they have lost their tolerance and are at real risk for overdose. “Giving Naloxone to inmates who are going to be released from prison can’t hurt anyone, it has no street value and may save lives,” said Pearson. “There is no negative to giving people this tool they can use to save someone’s life.”

In the past two years, ACR Health has trained 1228 individuals how to safely inject the opioid overdose rescue drug. We now offer instruction on nasal application of naloxone as well as injection delivery, depending on available supply.

To register for training call 800.475.2430 or Narcan@ACRHealth.org
ACR Health Names Director of Events and Business Development

ACR Health has named Anthony McEachern to the position of Director of Events and Business Development. Previously Mr. McEachern, through MCMC Enterprises, was Owner and Operator of four Tim Horton’s & Cold Stone Creamery locations in Central New York, overseeing 125 employees, during which time he established a relationship with ACR Health. “I was and am honored to support an agency that reaches out to those who are too often ignored. Everyone knows someone who has struggled to overcome addiction or faced a life-changing diagnosis. ACR Health opens its arms without judgment, treats all people with dignity and respect, and helps them get their lives back on track.”

“We are delighted to have Anthony on board,” said ACR Health Executive Director, Wil Murtaugh. “As ACR Health grows and diversifies in the services we deliver, it is critical that we cultivate and maintain relationships that will help us carry out our mission. With his impressive business background, Anthony will be a tremendous asset to the Development Department of ACR Health.”

Becoming Healthy by Eating Well

ACR Health offers Nutrition Health Education and Food and Meal Services for HIV positive eligible individuals through health-enhancing nutritional education sessions for individuals and groups, and food assistance through pantry bags and food vouchers.

Cindy had to re-learn food lessons of a lifetime to meet the goals she set for herself last year as part of the Nutrition Health Education program. “What could I possibly learn at my age?” Cindy wondered when she started nutrition education classes. “I’ve been cooking all my life!”

For starters, Cindy learned that she ate too much processed food which contained salt that contributed to her high blood pressure diagnosis. She commonly had blood pressure readings as high as 165/110. By lowering her salt intake, increasing the amount of fresh fruits and vegetables in her diet, and exercising, Cindy lost ten pounds and her blood pressure dropped back down to a normal range. Cindy was ecstatic the first time she had a blood pressure reading of 104/75.

“Rather than telling people what they can’t eat,” said Nutrition Educator Gabrielle Mayfield, “we like to focus on foods and activities that people should be increasing like fruits and vegetables, water intake, and exercise.”

Cindy tried – and liked! - new recipes that used whole food ingredients in combination with different herbs and spices that she selected from that particular lesson. She credits her increased energy and a greater quality of life to her new healthy lifestyle.

For more information about the Nutrition Health Education and Food and Meal Services and eligibility requirements please contact ACR Health Nutrition at nutrition@ACRHealth.org, or call 800.475.2430.
ACR Health offers its services to anyone without discrimination based on age, race, creed, color, gender, sexual orientation, economic status, political affiliation, marital status, handicapped status, or mode of transmission.

ACR Health is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

September 25, 2016 – Sunday
Last Bloom Party
Garden Party, hosted by Michael Compagni and Joseph Moore, to benefit the Q Center, beginning at 4:00 p.m. For information or tickets, call Moe at 475.2430 x 706 or events@ACRHealth.org

October 16, 2016 – Sunday
17th Annual First Frost AIDS Walk/Run 5K
1:00 p.m. Thompson Park Zoo, and Conservatory, Watertown. Sign up as an individual or a team. ACRHealth.org/events. Want to train with a group? Sign up for the Couch to 5K in 5 weeks. To register call Page Fitness 786-8032. Together we can #endAIDS.

While supplies last!
Holiday Ornaments
Gathering of Hope to share prayers & well wishes around a decorated tree Gift of Hope features a child opening a present
$20 per 2016 Set of 2, $12 per single ornament (if shipped), $11 per ornament if picked up

December 1, 2016 - Thursday
World AIDS Day
Remembrance service at 7:30 a.m. at LeMoyne College’s Panasci Chapel

COMMUNITY EDUCATION FORUMS

Forums provide HIV education to community members and those interested in becoming volunteers. Events are held monthly in Syracuse and Utica. Call 800.475.2430 to sign up.

LGBTQ YOUTH SUPPORT GROUPS

ACR Health has numerous programs for LGBTQ youth, including support group meetings in Syracuse, Utica, Watertown, and the Mohawk Valley. Participants are grouped by ages from 8-26.

The Q Center for a full listing

Q Center Syracuse
617 West Genesee Street
Call 315.701.2431 or QCenter@ACRHealth.org

Q Center Mohawk Valley
Call 315.793.0661 ext. 133 or GLBTQYouth@ACRHealth.org

Q Center Northern New York
Call 315.785.8222 ext. 164 or HDavis@ACRHealth.org

Volunteer Opportunities at Q Centers
ACR Health is looking for volunteers to assist with programming at its Q Centers in Syracuse, Utica, and Watertown. Interested persons must complete an application, available at ACR general volunteer orientation, and HIV training. Q Center volunteers undergo reference and background checks. For more information Volunteer@ACRHealth.org or 800.475.2430.

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