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COVER STORY



Cathy Meyer: From tragedy to helping others

By Jackie Bradley

Live in the day. Take care of the present," says Cathy Meyer, who considers each day a chance. Two years ago, she experienced the unimaginable. Her son, Aaron, while on a successful path to overcome substance abuse, died in a car crash just days after his 18th birthday. Today, through the support of the Aaron Meyer Foundation Inc., Cathy, her husband, Tom, and son, Patrick, are working to establish Aaron's legacy and help recovering young men. "This is how we want to honor Aaron," says Cathy. Aaron was the youngest of three children. When his brother, Patrick, arrived four years later, Cathy left her job as a legal secretary to become a mom.

She cherished her time at home with her boys and smiles when she recalls her special bond with Aaron. "I was his confidant at the end of his sophomore year at De Forest High School in 2003, Aaron had it all. "He lettered in track, made honor roll and played varsity football game his sophomore year, and had great friends," says Cathy. But after he received his driver's license in May, Aaron began to notice changes. "In July we discovered he was smoking marijuana.

He was not talking to us. He looked different," says Cathy. "Friends reassured me that Aaron was just being a teenager." "He was acting differently, not following our rules, and hating family. Strange people were showing up at our house; people we knew were involved in his activities," Tom adds. Recognizing Aaron's problem, the Meyers attempted to intervene. "We monitored his Internet conversations and printouts to the police," says Cathy. "We searched his room and had him drug- tested, but he learned to mask the urinalysis results consumed by Aaron's drug problem.

By August and September, our home was filled with tension." When Aaron returned to school for his junior year, his problem was leaving school at lunch and getting high at noon," says Tom, a real estate broker for Keller Williams Realty Next, the Meyer family car away. "That worked against us," says Cathy. "He began riding with other people, was sneaking out at night, violating curfew, urine tests, and becoming increasingly devious." "The next two months brought more chaos to the Meyer home. "There was a house wanting to push his family away. We knew it was the drugs.

This was not our Aaron," says Cathy. But the couple realized they could not keep Aaron away from his environment. "It was a matter of time before he would not do counseling," says Tom. After six months of chaos and turmoil, Tom and Cathy saw no local options to save Aaron. In November 2003, they began making plans for him. The Meyers had learned of Mount Bachelor Academy, an emotional growth boarding school in Prineville, Oregon. On Dec. 2 at 4:30 in the morning, two armed off-duty sheriff's deputies from Waukesha County took Aaron from his bedroom to a safe environment 1,600 miles away. Upon arrival at the academy, Aaron was defiant, and waited for a "friend," to rescue him. Though it was painful, she stuck with "the plan."

"We did not hear from Aaron on Christmas day and he did not speak to Tom until February," Cathy recalls. But the academy included counseling, academics, and large doses of exercise, affected a positive change in Aaron. That summer, Aaron participated in a wilderness program. Hiking in the desert and living on a diet of rice, lentils and water agreed with him. "We also saw Aaron's growth as he learned to play the guitar and took art classes," Cathy says of her son, whose athleticism once defined him.

Aaron returned to Madison in January, 2005, where he attended Horizon High School and planned to be a member of the school's first graduating class. On May 6, Aaron celebrated his 18th birthday. He asked his mom to make his favorite coconut cream pie. A few days later, a friend, a convicted drug dealer with revoked driving privileges, called asking for a ride to a job interview. To help his friend, just two miles from home, Aaron lost control of his truck. He died at the scene. Drugs were not a factor. "Aaron's blood tests were negative for illegal substances," Cathy says.

Cathy was at work at Keller Williams when Tom told her about Aaron's accident. "Patrick, Tom and I spent a lot of time alone

held very close together," she says. "Later, as our heads cleared, we began looking for things we could do to keep Aaron's story alive. Through counseling, the Meyers read "Continuing Bonds," a book that inspired them to create the Aaron J. Meyer Foundation. Aaron's parents' goal was to return to Oregon, attend Bend Community College, and live with friends from Mount Bachelor who were supportive. "We all know what we go through and we will support each other," he had said.

The Aaron J. Meyer Foundation is currently purchasing a house in the Isthmus area; a project that will keep Aaron's legacy alive and a house manager/mentor will live in the house. "It will be a safe place where guys in recovery can live with peers in recovery and connecting them to people who will open doors to healthy opportunities," Tom says. While focusing on Aaron's story through this parent's nightmare, exercise is also a positive outlet for her grief. Last September, she completed a six-city walk. "I have such a great family and network of friends. They are so supportive and just awesome," she says. Today, she pours time into making Aaron's House a reality. Tom smiles when he considers Cathy's future role in the home. "She will be a mother to all the kids and a friend to the moms," he says. "She will very likely bake coconut cream pies and other treats." That's what Aaron would want.

Jackie Bradley is a Madison-based freelance writer.

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