

A Love LOST

Story // Angela Ambrose

Erinn Pushor remembers the beginning of 2007 as one of the most exciting times of her life. She began dating Danny, a boy she had a crush on since the eighth grade. Their relationship began their sophomore year in high school.

“He was the most charismatic, wonderful person to be around,” Pushor says. “He was my first serious boyfriend, my first love.”



ERINN AND DANNY IN HAPPIER TIMES. "HE WAS THE MOST CHARISMATIC PERSON TO BE AROUND. HE WAS MY FIRST SERIOUS BOYFRIEND, MY FIRST LOVE," SHE SAYS.



While Pushor had steered clear of drugs, Danny—who played on his high school baseball and football teams, and was popular among his peers—had a reputation of smoking marijuana in middle school, and doing cocaine and prescription drugs in high school. In 2006, his parents sent him to a behavior modification program in Utah for nine months to help him break his drug addiction.

"When we started dating, he was completely sober. I was 100 percent under the impression that he was clean," Pushor says.

In March 2007, Danny's brother found him lying unconscious in the driveway of their home after overdosing on black tar heroin, a cheaper, less-refined form of OxyContin, which Danny had abused in the past. But this time it nearly cost him his life. Weeks later, when Pushor found out Danny was doing drugs again, she felt angry and deceived.

"I was shocked and I broke up with him," she says. "I was not dating a heroin addict."

Danny pleaded with her to get back together and promised he would never do it again. Pushor believed him and they started dating again.

In the fall, Danny returned to playing football at a high school in Chandler and appeared to be drug-free. On Sept. 21, Pushor picked him up from football practice and drove him back to his house. It seemed like just another relaxing evening hanging out together and doing homework. When Pushor returned home later that night, they spoke on the phone for a while. The couple was in a comfortable routine of calling each other right before bed and talking until one of them dozed off. Danny fell asleep first.

The next morning, while Pushor was getting ready for school, she checked her cell phone and noticed she had missed two calls from Danny's parents. She immediately knew something was wrong. When Danny's father tried to wake up his son for school, Danny was unresponsive, covered in vomit, his face blue. His cell phone was lying on his head.

"I went to the hospital and he was already dead. His body and face were a very pale white," says Pushor. The autopsy would later show that Danny died from a black tar heroin overdose.

A week later, the family held the funeral service at Cornerstone Church in Chandler. Pushor helped pick out her boyfriend's gravesite, casket and funeral clothes. She chose the blue polo shirt he wore on their first date only nine months earlier. Trembling with anxiety and overwhelming grief, she stood up in front of more than 1,200 people to give his eulogy. The church was packed with Danny's baseball and football teammates.

"Losing him changed my life forever," says Pushor. "I lost so much weight and my hair was falling out in chunks. For a long time, I just felt so lost and so alone. My best friend, the love of my life, was gone and I had no idea what to do with myself."

A few months later, Pushor attended a drug awareness presentation at Horizon High School in Scottsdale that would change her life. After the presentation, she went up to meet the speaker, Stephanie Siete, director of community education with Community Bridges, an Arizona nonprofit organization that provides substance abuse prevention and treatment services. The two women instantly connected and Pushor began working with the organization to help educate

young people about the dangers of drug and alcohol use. Pushor found herself channeling her grief and anger in a productive way. She started her own anti-drug club at Horizon High School, joined the Northeast Valley Coalition Against Methamphetamine and hosted community events at her school. In 2008, she received the Drug Free AZ Inspiration Award from Cox Charities.

"It was the only way I knew how to deal with my grief, and it was an outlet for me that was positive and healthy," she says. "If I could help one person, it was worth it. I just wanted to give meaning to Danny's death."

Today, Pushor remains committed to helping kids learn from Danny's mistakes. Last spring, she and Community Bridges teamed up and gave drug awareness presentations at 20 middle schools in the Phoenix area.

"It's really exciting because I'm getting paid to do what I love," says Pushor, who is currently studying elementary education at

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Arizona State University.

"My goal is to empower these kids to respect and care about themselves enough to make healthy choices, so they can have the future that Danny never got to have," she says.

When talking to young people, Pushor warns them of the highly addictive power of drugs.

"I don't believe that Danny was at a point where he had a choice...that night that he used [black tar heroin] and died. I don't think that was a choice—he was already addicted. But he had a choice the first time. That's the only time you have one." M

➤ To watch Erinn's video testimony, visit maskmatters.org/educate/high-school/illicitdrugs.