

DEVIN'S STORY: A LIFE WELL-LIVED

By Brie Kalenith as told to me by
Kristi Kastler, Devin's Mom

Devin Kastler was only 28 years old when he died on May 6, 2024. Devin died at home, found by his mother, Kristi, from synthetic fentanyl laced with xylazine (an animal tranquilizer) and the cutting agent 4-ANPP.

"He died trying. He was going to rehab the next day. So he never, ever gave up. His illness killed him." Kristi explains.

Kristi says, "I tell myself that I'm so lucky I was able to be Devin's mom. He was here for a short time, but I know that I was given a gift to be his mom. Some people never get the opportunity to even have a child."

Devin's character

Devin was an individual with hopes, dreams, and talents. He was a sensitive soul who cared more about others than he did himself.

Devin was 6'2", sensitive, artistic, deeply caring, and funny. He was a "wild card" in a shorter family, and was very protective of his younger brother, Jacob (8 years younger). He also had an older sister (3 years older) who was his first best friend. His relationship with his mother Kristi had always been close. He knew he was loved.

Devin was musically talented and loved music from preschool onward. He was a self-taught guitar and piano player. He wrote his own music and lyrics. Prior to his death, he recorded with Michael Herring ("Fish"), a guitarist known for working with Christina Aguilera, whom he met

when Herring visited a rehab center to share music. Devin's music is currently removed from public platforms like YouTube to protect copyright because a producer is actively working to turn his life story and music into a Broadway musical.



Devin was also an amazing graffiti artist who went by the name *Vast*. When asked why he chose that name, he said the world is very vast, and it's very misunderstood.

Devin loved animals. In fact, any pet the family ever had came to them because Devin had brought it home.



Some of the comments about Devin on the Forever Missed Tribute from friends and loved ones:

Jordan D - I've come to learn that we were connected by the universe. You are one of many reasons why I continue to choose to live a full and happy life.
Ophelia O. - He was such a pure-hearted human being. His goodness stretched all the way to the highlands.
Andre K. - Thanks for the joy you gave us.
Kimberley B - Devin was always very sensitive and kind.
Katie S - I will always remember Devin's smile and caring energy.

Kindness

Devin's name was chosen because it means divine.

"Kindness matters, and the heroes in life are those that reach out and are kind. Using your strength to pick on someone isn't, that's really cowardice. Devin was often picked on because of his sensitivity," relates Kristi.

Kristi had many stories to share that demonstrated his sensitive and kind nature. At age eight, he defended a classmate with Down syndrome on the swings when other kids were bullying him, enduring name-calling himself as a result. Shortly before his death, he bought food, socks, and a sleeping bag for a homeless man he saw while out meeting friends.

Kristi says, "He was a sensitive soul who wanted to help people. He had a fun sense of humour. He was just really funny. He loved to make people laugh."



Kristi holding Devin's picture

Childhood trauma, bullying & early struggles: A perfect storm

People who struggle with addiction often have trauma, mental health issues, and sometimes a predisposition towards addiction. For Devin, it was a perfect storm. Devin witnessed his aunt's two-year battle with cancer. His mother was caregiver to her sister's two children, so the illness was the center of the family for this period. When Devin was 13, his father was diagnosed with a cancer believed at the time to be terminal.

Because of his extreme sensitivity and lack of interest in traditional "masculine" sports, Devin was frequently picked on and bullied during his youth.

He struggled with anxiety and was diagnosed with ADD (attention deficit disorder). He was prescribed ADD medication at age ten; his mother believes early stimulant exposure may have activated an underlying genetic/addictive predisposition. He was introduced to marijuana around age 13. At 14, following an appendectomy, he was prescribed OxyContin and later took his father's pain medications.

By age 14, he accessed heroin on the street; at 15, someone injected him with heroin, beginning a lifelong, painful struggle with opioid use disorder or SUD (substance use disorder)

On addiction, stigma, and the treatment system

Kristi wants people to understand that addiction is painful, and it is an illness that is misunderstood. A family unit is sick when a member has an addiction. Kristi and her family spent thousands of dollars on treatment for his addiction.

"Drug behavior is very challenging to deal with. You often feel ashamed because of your child. When your child has an addiction, it's judged as a moral failure. The parents are often blamed for it. Or people are always giving parents advice on what they should do with their child. Or what treatment program to go to, or everybody has advice on how you should be helping your child.

I've tried everything. I was ostracized from groups. And my child was ostracized." recalls Kristi

Addiction can be very destructive. When you have a child who is stealing, what is looked at is the behaviour instead of the illness. The severity of the addiction illness can sometimes lead people to say and do things they otherwise wouldn't; often without a clear understanding of these behaviours in the first place. Somebody who doesn't have a child who has struggled with addiction finds it hard to understand.

Kristi not only lost a child, but was bullied too. "I've heard statements like 'your son is a problem.' and 'when we arrest a heroin addict, we arrest a thief.' I've heard people cheer, like, I can be out in public, and I can hear people making jokes about people who have addictions. None of it's really funny. I can give an example where somebody at work was talking about a fly, just because I'm a flight attendant, being in the cabin. And they said that they feel like when they drink coffee, they're a fly on meth." It was an insensitive comment born out of ignorance.

Devin went to rehab 18 times

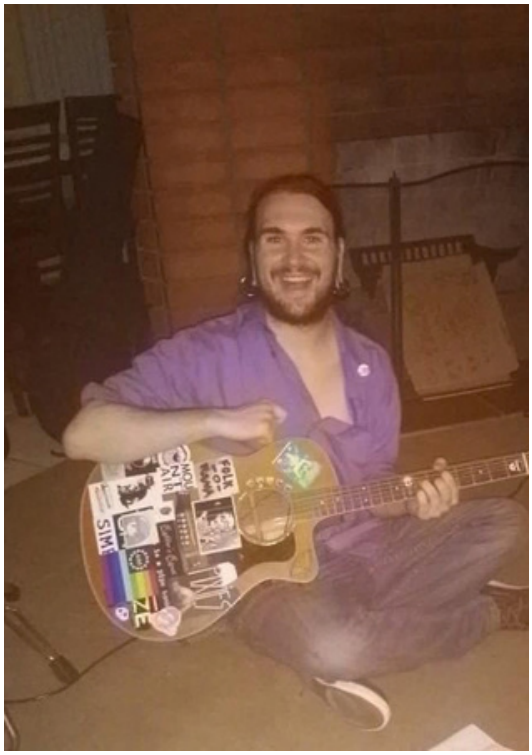
Treatment is extremely expensive (often over $2,500/month for basic sober living), and resources for youth under 18 are severely lacking. Incarceration is treated as a substitute for medical treatment.

Devin wanted sobriety as well, but the hoops he'd have to jump through were insane and aftercare is virtually non-existent. Treatment programs for youth under 18 were lacking.

"I think the rehabs weren't working because it's an opiate addiction, and 30 days is not enough time. As soon as somebody relapses, they get kicked out of their treatment programs, even if they relapsed on weed. So then they're kicked out, and then they become isolated again." Kristi explains.



"I took Devin to a rehab that promised it all. It looked really good on the outside. It was beautiful. It was in Malibu, California. It was everything a parent would want for the child to get well. They gave my kid $2,000 to go out to relapse to go buy drugs. It happens. So they could bring him back in, so they could use his insurance again. It's a vicious cycle. In that same rehab, the owner sexually assaulted my son's friend. It's such a challenging industry because I have had really, really good experiences, and I have had really bad experiences. And when you're a desperate parent, vulnerable, you and your child can get hurt," remembers Kristi.



Misconceptions about overdoses

While total death rates have slowed due to widespread Narcan availability, actual overdose rates are higher than ever. Street drugs are non-regulated, and extremely small amounts (as small as a grain of salt) or laced counterfeit pills ("One Pill Can Kill") prove fatal.

"There's a huge difference between medical fentanyl and synthetic fentanyl... On the black market, there's no control. It's cut with cutting agents that are dangerous... A salt granule can kill somebody," states Kristi. Narcan does not work on people who take xylazine.

Drug dealers add fentanyl and xylazine because it heightens the addiction and it's cheap and accessible. Fentanyl is 50 times stronger than heroin, and it guarantees repeat customers.

When you deal drugs, you deal death.

Charity Wiley was sentenced to 15 years to life for selling fentanyl laced with xylazine from Los Angeles county leading to the death of Devin Kastler. She sourced large amounts of powerful drugs from Mexico-connected organizations. She had business plans, pricing strategies, and kept meticulous notes. She preyed on some of the most vulnerable members of society. Charity was caught selling drugs to Devin. The autopsy showed the drugs which were in his system.

"When you deal drugs, you deal death." Kristi says. "I have numerous parents who don't know what happened to their children, and never get the answers they need."

Outreach & advocacy efforts

Podcast (DK 805 Podcast: Breaking Stigma): Kristi co-hosts a monthly podcast available via Instagram (@dk805podcast) to support grieving families, break the societal stigma around addiction, and discuss recovery and resilience.

Community advocacy: Kristi participates in events like the United Against Fentanyl / Walk for Lives in Washington, D.C., and speaks directly to high school students. She met a 13 year old girl who lost her brother to fentanyl and was training people how to use Narcan.



This picture needs a caption

Key messages for youth

"When I talk to youth, I tell them that the most important relationship that they can have is to develop the relationship with themselves. Because what we tell ourselves matters."

Kristi tells Devin's story and encourages youth to cultivate resilience to cope with life's heartbreaks. She suggests they turn to healthy outlets like music, individual sports (e.g., swimming), animals/pets, or trusted adults instead of substances. They need to be able to recognize that bullies often act out of their own need for approval or unresolved home issues.

"We're all gonna have moments where we don't do well, and so learning how to become resilient without selfishness is a life-long skill. If it doesn't feel safe, it probably isn't safe. Trust your instincts. Go find somebody that's a hero to emulate."

Kristi talked about practicing self forgiveness, compassion, empathy, and self protection. Resilience is remembering what's right, even when your heart is breaking. It's knowing that the day ends with the beautiful sunset, and it starts with the beautiful sunrise. We have to remember the beauty in life. Don't make a permanent decision on an emotion.

"I think that we need to start teaching our youth that sobriety is okay. I think as humans altogether, we need to stop celebrating every occasion: Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, whatever, with a glass of wine. Football and beer don't have to belong in the same sentence."



Key messages for parents

Kristi's advice for parents is to prioritize self-care and establish a strong support network. Be careful what information you accept as true. Base decisions on factual research rather than emotional desperation when seeking treatment. Listen authentically to your children, give yourself grace, and practice forgiveness. Parenting through addiction requires releasing perfectionism and guilt. As parents, we have to be an example. We have to get our lives in order.

"It takes a village to raise children. If you see a child struggling, remember that drug addiction is not contagious. I think that we need to start surrounding our youth like how elephants build a big circle around them to protect them. We need a community. I think we need to do that with this next generation coming up." Kristi states.

The finest warrior

"I tell myself that in Devin's death, he saved a lot of lives. I tell myself that God chooses his finest warriors to be on the front lines of any war that we're fighting... And so I need to pick up my shield in order to honour him," Kristi states proudly.

And Devin was given a tough assignment in this lifetime. He was on the front end of the opiate epidemic.

This side of the vale

Kristi looks forward. "I still have younger children, and I have grandchildren. And I have got to be a healthy example for them to know that even in spite of the loss of Devin, their life matters. They're here on this side of the vale. I honour their life and make sure that they know that they're not responsible for my mental health. I'm responsible for my mental health."

Closing thoughts

"Judgement is not wisdom... Differences are okay. Just because we don't understand something doesn't necessarily mean that person's wrong."

Remember that you can't tell the level of pain someone is carrying. It's so easy to dismiss people or react in anger without understanding what is behind that.

Kristi finishes with "Devin died knowing he was loved. And I don't carry guilt. I had to forgive myself for the things that hurt him when he was alive. I had to remind myself I was doing the very best I could." She is resolute in her beliefs as her eyes mist up.

Kindness matters, and the heroes in life are those that reach out and respond with kindness.