

TALK AT THE 27TH ANNUAL REMEMBRANCE CEREMONY 'for those who lose their lives to illicit drugs' – Monday 27th October, 2022

My son lost his life 30 years ago to an accidental heroin overdose. It is a long time ago. He was just 24. And we gather here today at this memorial for the 27th time to remember and grieve an increasing number of loved family members and friends because advocacy for change has not had the outcomes we wanted and hoped for.

But legislation passed just a few days ago here in the ACT may just be the turning point needed to shift away from the failed policy of using punishment, from using the criminal law to stop people from using drugs. Thanks mainly to the efforts of Michael Petterson and persistent work of others in the ACT Assembly it has decriminalised the personal use and possession of small amounts of drugs and will put more emphasis on a health and social response.

As I look back on the circumstances of my own son's death it is obvious to me that if drug use had not been a criminal act at that time the police would not have been involved and he would not have been frightened away from the support he needed.

Just a little about my son's story. Following an overdose where he was revived by ambulance officers and taken to hospital there was opportunity to help him. But the police, doing what the laws expected, followed the ambulance to the hospital, went to his bedside and threatened to harass him until he told them from whom he purchased the drugs. Of course this put him between a rock and a hard place. He discharged himself from the hospital, frightened away from the help that was available.

He went on an unplanned holiday overdosed again 2 weeks later, alone with no-one that time to call an ambulance and died. What was gained by this death?

A health response was available and his family loved him and were ready to help him. I remember a week or two after he died a nurse from the hospital where he was taken after his first overdose phoned to ask after his welfare. Health support was available but

And it is not only the families and friends who bear the loss. Contrary to what the propaganda would want you to believe many young people who have died were intelligent sensitive people with lots to offer society if only they'd been given the chance. My son for instance did much in his short life. Always active as a school boy, playing sport, enjoying music lessons, an accomplished chess player and cross country runner, working at a paper run, breeding budgerigars, loving his dog, Trixie, achieving good results in his year 12 certificate and later attaining a degree in computer science. Also at the age of 16 he along with a mate had this book of computer games for Atari 600 published. Quite an achievement at such a young age. I believe the games are still popular among Atari enthusiasts.

What a waste of what could have been a productive life.

Many of you here today will have similar stories of tragic, avoidable loss if only drug use had been decriminalised, the shame and stigma that keeps people away from seeking help and divides families may have brought different outcomes for many of us. There is now hope for families who follow –hope for less deaths –hope for less imprisonment and hope for more love and understanding within the whole community. As Nick Cave said "hope is optimism with a broken heart".

Prohibition drug laws are unjust, unfair, racist and hypocritical. They hand over the production and sale of certain drugs to organised crime and our kids and families pay the price.

May this small step in the ACT to decriminalise drug use pave the way for more just, fair and life saving changes.

Marion McConnell