



Diane Santos and her son, Mark, who died of a fentanyl overdose in 2023. Since her son's death, she has advocated for the expansion of harm reduction services.

Opioid death turns mother into advocate

By Cris Villalonga-Vivoni
STAFF WRITER

Nine days. That's how long Diane Santos had between learning about her son's opioid addiction and finding him dead in his bedroom. It was nine days of tears, confessions and phone calls to treatment centers, but also a sense of hope that her son, Mark, would recover. He was excited to start treatment, Santos remembered. He wanted to understand his behavior and stop using drugs. Then came the withdrawal. The symptoms were sudden and severe, prompting Mark to go to a local hospital emergency department for help. But Santos said her son was discharged without medication to treat his opioid use disorder. Instead, he was connected with a peer-support worker and given an access line to call the next morning. Mark died from an acute fentanyl overdose roughly 36 hours later. "He was so embarrassed and so ashamed, and he grew up with ... a great childhood," Santos said, explaining that she and Mark's father divorced when he was young, but we co-parented him. "He always had a room at his dad's house. It can happen to any-

Her son sought help for addiction. 36 hours later, she found him dead from a fentanyl overdose: 'Now I'm his voice'



Dr. Gail D'Onofrio, physician in chief of emergency services at Yale New Haven Hospital, advocates for integrating medication treatment into routine emergency care for people with opioid use disorder.

one." Although opioid overdose deaths have declined in recent years, overdoses involving opioids remain a leading cause of death among Americans under age 45. Effective medications exist to treat opioid use disorder and reduce the risk of overdose, yet many people who need them still cannot get them. Experts and advocates say stigma remains one reason. Substance use disorder is a chronic medical condition influenced by a range of biological, psychological and social factors, yet it is still commonly viewed as a problem of will-power or character. A national survey by Shatterproof, a non-profit working to counter addiction, found that an estimated 74% of adults did not view substance use disorder as a chronic medical condition like diabetes, arthritis or heart dis-

ease. Those attitudes not only shape their interpersonal relationships, but how someone asks for help and what happens when they do. "It is a biopsychosocial phenomenon," said Megan Halmo, vice president of healthcare at Shatterproof. "It is influenced and motivated by all kinds of factors, certainly that includes genetics, biology, family history, etc. Things that have nothing to do with character, moral strength."

Treatment gaps in healthcare Even among healthcare professionals, Halmo said, substance use disorder remains one of the more stigmatized chronic conditions. Patients can also encounter disparities in treatment. Black men, for example, are less likely to receive buprenorphine, one of several medications that can reduce withdrawal symptoms and help people remain in recovery, Halmo said. Patients treated with medications for opioid use disorder, or MOUD, were 76% less likely to overdose at three months than people who went untreated, according to a 2020 study. They were also more likely to still be engaged with medication treatment or other

Fire chiefs warn of 'national crisis' as trucks hit \$2M

Shortage means up to 4-year waiting period

By Sloan Brewster
CORRESPONDENT

Local fire chiefs say spiking fire truck prices and a national shortage of the vehicles are causing problems for departments and communities throughout the region. The issue is also being watched by the U.S. Congress, members of which claim pumper trucks can average \$1 million and ladder trucks can run as much as \$2 million. And, once an order is put in, the waiting period to receive the truck can extend up to four years, according to fire chiefs from several local departments. "(The cost) puts a strain and a burden on taxpayers and, unfortunately, you have to have this equipment," said Thomaston Fire Chief Glenn Clark. "It's putting a big strain on departments." In Fairfield for example, a ladder truck in 2016 set the department back \$1.3 million. The one they ordered this year? \$2.4 million — and it is will take four years to arrive, said Fairfield Deputy Fire Chief

Fire trucks continues on A4



Christian Abraham/Hearst Conn. Media file photo A view of the boardwalk running along Old Grove Park in West Haven on Oct. 24, 2023.

West Haven bans e-bikes on city's boardwalk

By Brian Zahn
STAFF WRITER

WEST HAVEN — The Rev. Alexander Garbera still remembers being struck by another cyclist while riding his bicycle on the West Haven boardwalk to the former Savin Rock Conference Center. The crash, which took place over 30 years ago, left him with a collapsed lung and a broken hip. "Needless to say, bicycle safety is near and dear to my heart," Garbera told the West Haven City Council last week. Since that 1995 incident,

E-bikes continues on A10

Tuntivate, Rudel win Faxon Law New Haven Road Race 20K titles

By Kwame Colecraft
CORRESPONDENT

NEW HAVEN — Kieran Tuntivate held off Charles Hicks to win the 20K at the 49th Faxon Law New Haven Road Race on Monday. Tuntivate, a 29-year old 10,000 meter specialist and Harvard graduate, finished in 58 minutes, 3 seconds. Hicks' time was 58:06.

Rachael Rudel won the women's race in 1:04:58. The 32-year old from Centennial, Colorado, won going away over Elena Hayday of Minneapolis, who finished in 1:05:53. The race once again served as the USA 20K men's and women's national championships. Hicks and Rudel won those titles. The national championship was the first for Rudel.

"I'm just lucky to be here," Rudel said. "I'm kind of this girl that came out of nowhere this year, so I'm just lucky to not be injured, mentally healthy, physically healthy. I was honestly smiling during the entire race." Rudel said she came to the realization that she was going to win the race around the last 5,000 meters. "I started to realize that I had

Race continues on A10



Overall race winner Kieran Tuntivate (431) and USATF winner Charles Hicks (11) run the 20K race side by side during the 20K at the Faxon Law New Haven Road Race on Monday.