



Summer's Story

As told by her mother, Kristin Hoin

Thursday January 8th – 7:54 am was my last conversation with my daughter...I called her to check in like I always do, and to talk about a sweater...6 days later I buried her in that same sweater...I struggle to remember if my last words to her were, “ I love you”???, as they usually were.

For the last 12 years I had watched my daughter struggle with the hell of addiction. She had fought a mighty battle and at last it had taken her from me, her family, and her 3 young boys.

Those 12 years were filled with denial, hurt and pain; not only for me as her mother and for her family, but mostly for her as the addict -- rehabs, jail, court, living and running on the street in the depth of winter, walking out on her child's 4th birthday party because she couldn't make it to watch him blow his candles out because she needed her next fix; losing her only brother's respect, breaking her children's hearts, being thrown from a car at 55 miles an hour and pushed down three flights of stairs by her dealer when she had a relapse, because he thought she had ratted him out, when instead she had kept herself clean for 6 months.

Summer wanted to live. Those who knew her, know she was larger than life. If Summer was in the room, you knew it. She wore every emotion she had on her sleeve and would make you aware of it (not always in the most appropriate fashion, but there was never a doubt that you knew where you stood with her.) .She loved her family and her three children with all her heart. She wanted to live a drug and alcohol free life, but it continued to be just beyond her grasp no matter how hard she tried.

October 2012, Summer relapsed using crack cocaine. When she used crack, she became paranoid and fearful. She heard a knock on the door to her apartment building, thinking it was the drug dealer who had just pushed her down the flights of stairs, she ran out of her door, busting through the door of the apartment directly across from hers and then running through their plate glass window, just missing killing herself as the plate glass broke...this was her crime...this was her crime that lead her to a felony charge and the opportunity to choose drug court.

Summer had many conversations with me about her decision to join drug court. She knew it would be the harder road for her; that she could just serve her time for the crime she was to be convicted of and go back to her old life, but she wanted this. She wanted to be clean and sober and to mother her children and to give peace back to her family. She told me “I chose drug court, because I can't stand to live in this hell anymore.”

Summer's decision to choose drug court, gave her the best year and a half of her life, since spiraling into drug addiction 12 years earlier. It wasn't easy, and she wasn't always successful at the tasks and challenges she faced. Relapses occurred, but she continued to fight the battle. I called it a slippery slope upward...4 steps up, 2 steps back, but always upward. Instead of pain and disappointment, we once again shared laughter and love and many, many hugs. I never let her leave my car when dropping her off at the YWCA without saying I love you and demanding a hug. After a while, I stopped having to demand a hug and they were freely given. Two years before her passing she spent Christmas in jail, one year before she was in a rehab facility, but on her last Christmas, she was home -- surrounded by her family, forgiven by her brother, holding her three boys in her

arms and giving presents to everyone. She was so proud to be able to give, not just take. Her last Christmas card had the word peace on it and in it she promised me that this was her gift to me, to bring me peace.

Although, I am sorrowful and sometimes feel that I cannot breathe without my daughter in my life, I do have the peace of knowing that her struggle is over and that she is at peace as well.

Let me take you back a bit....Summer's High school graduation... The possibilities would be endless after this... what would the next step be? A job, college...what career would she choose??

Somehow the words heroin addict didn't come to my mind as a possibility.

However, that is exactly the words that were being spoken to me during a phone call in May of 2002...I will never forget the day....a beautiful spring day...sitting alone in my house when the phone rang...one of Summer's close friends was on the phone...I think you need to know, Summer has a problem with Heroin....the floor crashed out from beneath me and the hell that is known only to someone struggling with addiction and to their families began...

Let's go back a bit further...Summer was a beautiful young child...full of life and spirit...always happy...always smiling...impish and a bit stubborn...life was good...then in fourth grade Summer disclosed that a very traumatic event had been occurring in her life. She was a victim of child sexual abuse. She was abused by someone very close to her; someone she loved and trusted. Life was never the same for Summer. Although she received counseling for many years, the whole structure of her life had changed including her perception of herself. Little did I know, that Summer began experimenting with alcohol at the tender age of 9. I didn't have it in my house, so I never assumed she had access. Fast forward to 14 years of age...Mom, I think I need help. I have been experimenting with marijuana and I can't stop. I immediately took her to a counseling center where she successfully completed the outpatient program; Summer assuring me all was well. Summer had the normal middle school and high school years, albeit hers were a bit tougher than others as she struggled with the inner pain. From the outside all appeared relatively well. Summer was tough; she had put up walls, and although I tried, I could never get her to share her innermost feelings about what had happened to her as a child.

Memories of family vacations...trips to Disney World... visits with family...these were our happy memories. A stay at an inpatient treatment center when Summer was having a difficult time coping, a visit to the Crisis Prevention Unit at Albany Medical Center, these were our difficult memories.

Summer became a young mother in the year following graduation. Her son was her pride and joy. Her love for him was apparent in her every move, until that fateful day that I received the phone call. When I look back now, knowing what I know, I can acknowledge that the disease of addiction had taken control of her life. Her love for her son was not any less, however the power of the disease was too great. Summer once told me, "Mom, I was an addict before I even knew I was." Looking back, it's no wonder. Shake my family tree and alcoholism is present throughout the past century. My father suffered from the disease of alcoholism and I recently discovered that my grandfather, whom I had never met, had died at 36. When I read the death certificate it indicated that he had died of alcoholism and cirrhosis of the liver. The odds were stacked against her before she even drank her first drink or picked up her first drug.

I couldn't even begin to imagine the pain that my daughter was in; what the nightmare of addiction was like for her. All I could relate to was the pain that I was in, the sadness of watching my son watch his sister slip away and the longing in my grandson's eyes every time we said goodbye to his mother after a visit.

I was scared for her...wanting to help her and not knowing the right thing to do...helping to care for her children when she could not, loving her despite the addiction...the choice that I made was to keep going, day by day...hoping and praying that one day she would be successful in recovery...living the life she so deserved...providing support and guidance when she was sober and ready...and backing off when helping her would have been enabling. Summer wanted to be sober, she never wanted her life to be lived struggling with addiction, but she made the decision to go back to the unhealthy relationship, which only compounded her feelings of low self-worth...her past wounds from childhood sexual abuse were reopened. The relationship ended as she predicted and Summer once again turned to what she knew would dull the pain...drugs.

Summer disappeared for a time...and after many months we found out that she was living on the streets of Hudson. These were some of the darkest days of Summer's life. During this period, I had to make the difficult decision not to enable my daughter... I couldn't rescue her, she had to rescue herself...which meant taking phone calls on cold winter nights when I could hear her walking on the street, feet crunching in the snow, paranoid from the use of drugs...thinking that the one who had victimized her was after her once again...trying to encourage her to go the local hospital ER to seek help...knowing that if I got in my car to pick her up, she would be gone before I even got there.

During this period, I relied on the criminal justice system to keep track of Summer and prayed that she would get arrested and end up in jail so I would know where she was at night and that she was alive...I wrote a letter to the local Judge in Hudson, begging him to sentence her to jail and then to a long term treatment program, stating that if he did not do this, I feared for her life...We were blessed, Summer was arrested, and touched the heart of the local District Attorney who did her best to deal with Summer with mercy and treatment in mind. She had a family member herself who struggled with addiction and was the first person that I knew to treat Summer as if she had a disease, not a moral failing.

Summer began the next five years of her life trying to live a life in recovery, trying to get sober. During this period she met a wonderful man and had two more children...two boys...whom she loved deeply...together along with her older son, they became the reason she continued to fight this battle...she became very involved with AA and surrounded herself with sober friends.

Summer was doing very well, she had a year of sobriety under her belt, her own apartment in Scotia, and her children were back in her life on a weekly basis when she had a relapse in the fall of 2012. I will never understand why it occurred that day...everything was going so well...all she wanted was right in front of her for the grasping...people I have spoken with agree with what I call, "Create a crisis". When things are going well for people who are living in recovery, it is often frightening...it is a new way of living, what if you can't keep this up for ever, what if you can't succeed...instead of waiting for the axe to fall, go ahead and create the crisis yourself.

Summer's relapse involved the use of crack cocaine, when she used crack cocaine she became paranoid and fearful...fearful that her abuser was coming after her...She heard a knock on the door of her apartment building...thinking it was the drug dealer who had just pushed her down a flight of stairs, he had done so because he hadn't seen her in so long because she was clean that he thought she had "ratted" him out, in her paranoid state she ran of her front door, busting through the apartment door directly across from hers and then running through their plate glass window...this was the crime that would lead her to a felony charge and the opportunity to choose drug court.

Summer wanted to live...if anyone of you personally knew Summer, you would know that she was larger than life. If Summer was in a room you would know it...she wore every emotion she had on her sleeve and would make you aware of it...there was never a doubt that you knew where you stood with her...she loved her family and her three children with all of her heart...she wanted to live a drug and alcohol free life, but it continued to beyond her grasp no matter how hard she tried...

Summer had many conversation with me about her decision to join drug court...she knew that it would be the harder road for her, that she could just server her time for the crime she was to be convicted of and go back to her old life...but she wanted this, she wanted to be clean and sober and to mother her children...to give peace back to her family...she told me... I am choosing drug court because I can't stand to live in the hell of addiction any more.

I was never more proud of Summer than when she elected to participate in Schenectady County Drug Court. This decision gave her and our family one of the best years of our lives together...it was a slippery slope at times...however she kept moving forward, one step at a time. We were reunited as a family. Summer was an active mother of her children and in September of 2014 Summer chose to join a couch to 5k training group which was being provided at the Schenectady UWCA by a group called STEM (Strong through Every Mile). Summer made a choice to do something positive, health and empowering for herself. The day of the race arrived, a cold snowy day in December. The moment that Summer crossed the finish line in the pouring rain was a moment that I will never forget...smiling, never giving up, she had run every step of the way...and she had done so in honor of her grandmother. Like every other day of her life, I was proud of my daughter, however this day was a step above the rest.

The month of December was amazing, we celebrated our first Christmas together in 3 years at home -- laughing and making memories with her three children. She was home for my birthday and her oldest son's 13th birthday. She, my husband and I went to a Jim Brickman concert on my birthday that year. It was a beautiful snowy night in Troy; memories I will never forget.

Fast forward a few weeks to another beautiful snowy day...here are some words written about that day:

An autopsy is performed on the body of Summer Smith at Ellis Hospital on 1/9/2011. The body is identified by the attached name tag and is received in a blue bag with a seal bearing the number 009591 attached to the bag. The body is clothed in a red long sleeve tee shirt and blue pants. Multiple tattoo marks are found to be present on the surface of the body. On the right foot is the words Richie and Anthony are tattooed on top of a butterfly. On the left foot the word Caden is tattooed. (These are Summer's children's names) On the upper chest area are tattooed the words "To thy own self be true". (For those of you who do not know, these famous words written by Shakespeare are on the anniversary coins received by those in AA as a recognition of time in recovery.)

Summer and I had planned to attend a church service that Sunday January 11th with her brother. I attended with her brother Daniel, standing side by side clinging to each other and weeping. Ironically the sermon that was preached that day was called "Being Free" and the verse that day was from Romans 7. The words shared seemed to come directly from Summer and I chose to have them read at her funeral. In the weeks after her death, I comforted myself in reading Summer's Bible and in it I found those same verses underlined in red by Summer herself. I'd like to share them with you:

I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate. I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't what to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway.

I have discovered this principle of life -that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love God's law with all my heart, but there is another power that is within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord!

Although I am filled with sorrow and sometimes feel that I cannot breathe without my daughter in my life... I do have the peace of knowing that she is free from the disease of addiction and her struggle is over....she is free at last!

The following words were written by Lauren Trunko, the Housing Coordinator at the Schenectady YWCA Housing Program, who ran side by side with Summer at her first 5k race, and placed in a memory book for Summer's Children.

Richie, Anthony and Caden: Your Mom had the most infectious laugh and smile. She made no apologies for who she was and she didn't have to. Summer had a heart of gold, with jewelry to match! Your mom was so kind to everyone. One of the older women who lived at the YWCA couldn't afford a winter coat. Without telling anyone else, your mom went out and bought her one so she wouldn't be cold. That the kind of woman your mom was. I had the privilege of seeing how happy and cheerful she would be after she would see you boys, it would recharge her soul and give her purpose in the moment. Your mom and I also ran a race together on 12/6/2014 called the Jingle Bell Run. Her and I, side by side pushing through the pain, the rain and the freezing cold with in our faces. She pushed me and I pushed her. Especially as we approached the finish line! One step at a time, one foot in front of the other until we reached the finish line. Such is life, when you don't know what else to do and aren't sure you can go on, just put one foot in front of the other, feel the cool breeze on your face and think of your mom-you WILL reach your finish line.

With belief in lives lived in recovery,

Kristin Hoin,

Summer's Mom, Race Director, Summer Smith 5K Addiction Awareness Memorial Run