

JoAnna

I lost my father to a fatal overdose on Thanksgiving Day when I was 15 years old, and that was the time when Naloxone was not readily available and the word 'overdose' was just a murmur, people didn't even talk about it.

And I went to my dad's funeral, sad, alone.

Finally, when I decided to go up to the casket, I walked up to the casket, I looked over on the table, and there happened to be flowers and cards and a blanket and I was like, who sent all of this stuff?

So, I went over to the table and I looked at the cards and it said, "To Joanna. Love your friends and family at Sherman High School."

And in that moment, I didn't feel alone anymore.

I didn't know it then but that's what sparked the community organizer in me.

Because ultimately it's the communities that help the people.

You know, I wish that I could say that I learned from my dad's mistakes but generational curses are hard to break.

And I spent the next 10 plus years in my own chaotic drug use.

In December of 2017, I found myself sitting in another funeral, and it was one of my very best friends.

He had passed away at home from an overdose.

And I was there, I was there physically but my mind was in a different place.

And I was thinking back to my time during active use when him and I used together.

And we were sitting in my apartment complex and we thought about recovery.

Even using drugs, we thought about recovery.

Was it possible?

Can you do it?

Do we know anybody that has lived the life that we do that now has a home, has a job, has a family, and isn't suffering through the things that we are suffering through?

And it haunts me all the time that I didn't reach out to one of my very best friends growing up and tell him, "Hey, recovery is possible."

"I'm doing it and you can do it."

And it was at his funeral that I decided that I was gonna be the person that if nobody knew anybody, that they were gonna know me and they were gonna know that it is possible and they were gonna know that they could do it.

I started off doing a lot of event organizing because I really liked that aspect of bringing people together to celebrate.

Like, there's so much hurt all the time.

Like, you need to have people together to empower them, you know, to encourage leadership in them, to give them hope and not just hope, but hope and action, like, sending them out after the event with a purpose.

And it's those kind of things that you need to organize in communities and to build supports and to build constituencies to make bigger change.

And that's now where my job has brought me to is now I'm teaching other people how to share their story for purpose.

I'm teaching them how to testify in committees.

I'm teaching them how to organize in their communities.

You know, I'm giving, opening up the door for people with lived experience to be on governor's councils and on subcommittees, and be on event planning committees because I don't wanna be the only person at the table.

Like, it was good for me to be able to open the door to get at the table, but now I'm just leaving the door open for everyone else to follow along.