

WIFE OF A DOORS ROCKER WARNS ABOUT DRUG OVERDOSES

By Julia Negron



I can't help but think back 40 years ago; to the time I got up close and personal with overdose. The Sunset Strip scene of 1966, 1967's "Summer of Love" and the Monterey Pop Festival were my rock 'n' roll training grounds. I was working in the A & R department of Liberty Records, and by 1968 I had moved in with and was soon married to rock icon John Densmore of the Doors.

A most fabulous lifestyle; all fun and no consequences. I often look back and wonder what the world would be like if we knew then what we know now. We did not know what dangerous games we were playing.

I remember an intimate birthday dinner party for Jim Morrison before he went to Paris. We all laughed when another Doors wife and I rolled up the birthday present we had found for Jim - a Courvoisier cognac bottle decanter on wheels made to look like an antique war cannon. Today I might choose something different.

Even then there were whisperings about some of our favorite musician friends being "real" junkies - Tim Hardin, James Taylor? It was hard to believe. Then came the news - both Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin were dead.

But the real shock came when my own mother died of an overdose at 47 years old. Still, I saw it as a fluke or even expected, after all my mother had a long history of drug and alcohol problems.

Then Jim. Jim Morrison! Even our own little rock circle didn't seem to know an overdose killed Jim. Today I have no doubt that it did - and that his life could have been saved.

Suddenly, hearing about someone you knew from the music scene dying from an overdose became commonplace. "Remember so-and-so, the drummer from so-and so?" "Yeah why?" "He OD'd." "Far out."

Only it wasn't really so far out, it was just sad. I developed a drug habit right along with my second husband, Three Dog Night singer Chuck Negron. We took ODs in stride, happy to survive, part of the price, part of the game.

Who knew we would survive long enough to look back in sadness on the wasted lives and unsung songs, the unwritten poetry, the unpainted art.

My own life was saved twice by Narcan (naloxone), administered by the private paramedic we kept on call. In 1984, my own baby sister Connie died of a drug overdose. In 1985, I checked myself into rehab at Cedars hospital, and never shot heroin again.

As time marched on I would see my own son on life support, another overdose! He is okay today, and in recovery, thanks to medical intervention. But not so lucky were all the other rocker parents who did lose their children. Oscar Scaggs, Jessica Rebennack, Andre Young Jr - so many kids of music legends lost. All lives that could have been saved, like mine, if overdose prevention and awareness was part of drug education in schools, medical facilities and rehabs.

Aug. 31 is International Overdose Awareness Day. Today we know that all life matters and things can change. Now that I am a cleverly preserved rock dowager, relying on my stories and memories for thrills, I've painfully watched a younger generation of rockers die of overdoses. Their numbers are legion, the sadness intolerable - they would have practiced their art for another 40 years like my lucky living peers have. Alive today, long gray hair, our leather pants bursting a little bit at the bum. We are still full of stories and music, all the promise that rocked life in the '60s. I want that young life and music to continue.

On Aug. 31 I will be taking my hippie sensibilities out of mothballs for a street protest in Hollywood to raise awareness that drug overdose is preventable. It is a medical emergency that needs to be treated with urgency, dignity and without fear of arrest. If Jim Morrison were alive today he would have at least written a poem about it and maybe joined me - gray hair, bursting leathers pants and all.

Julia was born in New York City, went to high school in Santa Barbara and college in L.A. She has been in personal recovery since 1985. She found a career in substance abuse counseling and is certified as an Addiction Specialist since 1990, supervising and training residential addiction treatment staff. Now retired, Julia is currently active in advocating for changes in our punitive drug policies, reducing stigma, and (since her own son's incarceration) ending mass incarceration. Her passion is to end "caging" of drug offenders. Her goal is to move the issue of drug dependence out of the hands of law enforcement and courts and give it to the professionals who are best suited to work with addiction as a public health issue. Julia Negron is a co-founder of "Moms United to end the War on Drugs" and a Board Member of "A New PATH (Parents for Addiction Treatment and Healing)" She currently lives in Sarasota, FL.

THE OVERDOSE CRISIS

By Gretchen Burns Bergman

There is nothing more tragic than young lives being lost unnecessarily before they have a chance to reach their full potential. The grief experienced by parents and family members left behind is heightened by the sense of frustration and even rage, that this loss could have been prevented. Yet, many don't talk about accidental fatal overdose because of shame and stigma.

August 31 is International Overdose Awareness Day...a day to acknowledge individual loss and family grief when loved ones have suffered overdose. This day of awareness was started in Australia by members of the Salvation Army and Community Health Development programs in 2000, and is acknowledged worldwide today.

California has the highest number of overdose deaths in the country. According to the Centers for Disease Control, drug overdose now ranks as a leading cause of accidental death in the United States, second only to motor-vehicle accidents. It is the leading cause of death among people who use drugs around the world. These numbers are rising due to prescription opioid drugs.

I am the mother of two sons who have addictive illness. My older son is in long-term recovery and works as a drug and alcohol counselor. In his profession he helps people to find recovery and live meaningful lives. His story could have had a darker ending. Many years ago he was left unconscious after partying with his friends. Thankfully, a Good Samaritan took him to the emergency room and called me. I waited for hours in the middle of the night not knowing if he would live or die. My younger son has been in a position to save the lives of his drug using friends several times, with the use of naloxone. Worry is my constant companion.

I wonder how many of our sons and daughters have survived an overdose, and we don't know it, or realize how lucky we are that they still have futures to look forward to. Parents of drug users have panic attacks, not because they are co-dependent, but because they know their offspring are in real danger. Remember the saying, "Do you know where your children are?" warning us to keep close watch on our kids to keep them safe. This haunts us even when our child becomes an adult, when we understand that addiction is a life-threatening disease.

I have several friends who have lost a child needlessly to overdose. After her son Jeff died of an accidental overdose, Denise Cullen started helping others suffering from what she calls this "unique, stigmatized and isolating grief."

There are solutions that can save lives, like Good Samaritan policies that provide limited criminal immunity for both the witness and the victim of an overdose. Unfortunately witnesses of an overdose often don't call 911 out of fear of arrest for associated drug use. We now have a 911 Good Samaritan law in California. Naloxone, a non-narcotic drug that reverses overdoses could be made more available. We must adopt strategies that will keep people with drug problems alive for the cure.

A New PATH (Parents for Addiction Treatment & Healing) holds a candlelight vigil each year on August 31, which is International Overdose Awareness Day, to honor individuals who have lost their lives to overdose. Gretchen Burns Bergman is Co-Founder of A New PATH & Lead organizer of Moms United to End the War on Drugs national campaign. www.aneupathsite.org.