That's My Boy

A father's 10-year journey through the triumphs and defeats of his son's opiate addiction.

By Jayne Gillis

"It is such a mysterious place, the land of tears."
"The Little Prince"
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

"He was the most giving, most non-judgmental person I had ever known," Felicia burst out as soon as she made her way up to the front of the room, overlooking the body of a man covered in heavy foundation who felt as frozen and partially whole as the hearts in the 1980s-dated room.

"There ain't never been anyone else who has ever been able to sense my feelings and say something comforting," said the dark-haired, leather-coated large woman who may have been 30, but carried the burdens of a life of poor choices.

The mish-mosh crowd of coworkers from the parents' corporate America jobs was folded in with the food-stamp, Georgia Peach card-carrying servers. All joined in a chorus of nose sniffles, wet rolling tears, and heavily congested-nose breathing for the 28-year-old high school athlete whose Oxycodone-turned, heroin-abused body lay silent.

Felicia recalled to the tissue-filled room how her eight-year-old son Aiden had looked forward to Trevor showing him how to increase his pitching speed, and where on the bat to hit the baseball so he could reach that home run and bring all the players on his Little League team over home base. She said Aiden has been asking when his friend Trevor would be coming over again, since his own dad was absent from his life.

She then recalled how generous Taylor was; often picking up the tab for her and her friends when tips were low and business was slow. She looked down at the front row and nodded at Taylor''s dad, commending him for what a wonderful son he had raised.

I sat quietly in the front row of pews next to this man whom Felicia had just given a nod. My pedicured feet couldn't be seen inside my Louboutin shoes. How ridiculous I spent this kind of money on these red-bottomed designer pumps, I thought as my mind was racing. I re-crossed my legs and tried to figure out how my life had intertwined with this motley group.

Listening to Felicia, I recalled a very different experience with Taylor, my stepson who kept his father engaged almost daily in his urgent requests for money.

"Dad, I need the money today...right now," I would hear Taylor

urgently requesting of Jack a 50-something man with a heart of gold and a never-ending belief in his son. “Dad, when are you transferring the money,” Taylor would beckon. “You have the worst luck of anyone I know,” I could hear Jack saying to his son, actually believing these preposterous stories.”Let me get this straight...you need money to buy landscaping tools that the owner won’t pay for until you finish the job...and you can’t finish the job and get paid at all without these tools?” This was then followed by a reference to some conspiracy against him: “Okay, you still have not received a paycheck from the last place? I’ll get in touch with Kathleen (family lawyer) tomorrow to help.”

Just another demand for cash that needed to be wired immediately for mishaps that seemed to be the voodoo doll curse of his unfortunate dealings nearly everywhere he turned or in whatever he tried to accomplish. Bad luck seemed to be always close behind Taylor.

Sadness had not hit me yet. The overwhelming anger filled me of his deceitfulness and trickery that I suspected all along, yet kept my husband Jack unable to sleep and eat often due to worry his son may relapse and have to be brought back to life as he had been two or three other times after overdoses.

In just the three years that I had been involved with the family, I recalled not just one or two, but three Christmas Eves when Taylor didn’t call and was

nowhere to be reached. My husband, Jack, was a dad who had dedicated his time and energy to a career meant to offer a comfortable life for his family, more than his parents could offer him.

A father dreams of his boy's triumphant life

Jack himself had been strong in build and naturally athletic, excelling at whatever sport he played in high school. His Gallagher High School football team had made it to the Michigan State Finals in 1981, narrowly missing the state title. He had recalled that day often over the years, thinking maybe he would have a son one day he could train in sports to grow up to be an even better athlete. He would foster his future son, he thought, in whatever sport he desired, and help him to perhaps earn a scholarship to a university worthy of his exceptional skills. Taylor was that son.

Jack's own dream of attending a large university with a Division I sports team ended up being just that: a dream. His father's dream was for his own son and only child to go to his alma mater, a small private college where he had fallen in love with Jack's mom and gave graciously to its endowment every year.

Now Jack had Taylor, his blue-eyed, tall, athletic son, who had fallen in love with baseball after playing as a child. Not only did he adore the sport, but he excelled in it as well. Pitching was his strength. His clocked speed was 80 mph. "That's my boy," Jack yelled out from the stands as Taylor's pitching

speed was clocked by his high school coach during a game and the record-breaking number was announced. “That’s my boy,” he whispered to himself, experiencing the afterglow from that dopamine rush of pride in the son he had always dreamed about before he had even known him.

His boy’s first home run

It was near the end of the spring season for the Panthers, Taylor’s high school baseball team that had once been a winning team and was projected to regain that title again. It was an unusually hot April day in Alpharetta, a northern suburb of Atlanta. Players were wiping sweaty hands on pants and readjusting baseball caps as they were sliding out of place from the late day heat.

Taylor was up to bat. Off and on a team member voice and crowd holler could be heard as he was in place on home plate in his batter stance ready to take on whatever style ball came his way. The pitcher wound the ball and it quickly reached Taylor, where he swung at the exact moment needed, hitting the ball with a snap, way in the air out of anyone’s sight to the welcoming branches of the pristine trees beyond the field. It seemed the trees were waiting, ready to envelope this small but firm white leathered sphere. Not focusing where the ball had ended up, Taylor began his homerun, stopping briefly at first, then second, then third, then home base as a standing crowd went wild.

Just as Taylor made it home, the ball was making its way back to the pitcher, who handed it to the glowing player with a sportsmanlike high five. The crowd watched intently as Taylor walked toward the stands.

“Here dad, I want you to have this,” Taylor told his dad as he handed him the ball he earned from his first homerun in the Alpharetta High School game. The team won (10-0). “You make me what I am,” he said. Jack took the ball in his hand and hugged Taylor tightly, thinking how happy his son made him. “I love you, son,” he said to him with tear-filled eyes as he sat down and watched Taylor make his way back to the dugout.

The crowd was still screaming and yelling, “Go T3,” minutes after he had been back. This type of excitement is what made a school’s pride go on long after the winning game. Taylor was the lynchpin in Alpharettal’s re-found school pride.

Boys will be boys

After the game, Taylor and his yes m’am-polite, attractive fellow athlete friends gathered at Jake’s house to celebrate. As they all arrived, Rhys was the first to greet them with high fives and back pats. Rhys was the senior older brother to the boys’ teammate Jake. He was popular with the ladies, tall, with a cocky attitude, not unusual for most football players at Alpharetta. Rhys had been sidelined for spring sports with a shoulder injury from the fall’s football season.

“Hey guys,” he said, “ You should try one of these pain pills I got for my shoulder,” Rhys told a few of the boys who were busy inhaling a joint that was just lit and already making its way around. “It’s some serious good #$%@.”

Taylor and some of the boys listened with interest. “Sure,” said Taylor. “I mean it is a prescription; how bad could it be, right?”

Preparing for the talent scouts

A few years had passed since that night. Taylor was now entering his senior year. He had been preparing all year to perfect his hitting and pitching skills. Howie McCann, the father of Atlanta Braves own Brian McCann, was his hitting coach, and Al Getz, Brian McCann’s agent, was his pitching coach.

Taylor was confident and poised for a college scholarship. Jack saw him playing for a minor league team. He said he wasn’t sure if he was up to major league playing status, but he was confident he could play for college and maybe even the minors.

But as the year grew on, scholarships were being awarded to other students. None of them were going to Taylor. “You have to get your grades up so you can get a HOPE Scholarship,” Jack told Taylor. “If you already have a HOPE Scholarship, you will be more attractive to colleges since they would only

have to award you room and board vs. tuition and room and board." Jack's words fell on deaf ears.

His growing addiction

Meanwhile, Taylor's addiction to Oxycodone was still present and growing, while hiding it from both parents. Life continued on. He was still being coached at the Windward Baseball Academy in Alpharetta. Scouts were looking at Taylor there, and nationally through the well-recognized East Cobb Baseball, in which he had also played. Taylor's drug use was now known and talked about. Scouts looked away.

A final push to be recognized

May of 2008 was Taylor's high school graduation. Instead of a party or the usual fanfare, Taylor chose to play in the Georgia Elite Baseball Team that had selected him. The team had been hand picked and offered a chance to play in Hawaii, where talent scouts would be ready to offer scholarships to colleges across the U.S. Trevor and his mom travelled to Hawaii and he played well there.

Taylor returned home to Georgia and waited for the scholarship offers. They never came. Taylor's addiction had become well known and his reputation was preceding him now.

The summer ended and Taylor's depression and hopelessness made his addiction grow. Soon heroin replaced prescription drugs to satisfy his growing addiction.

Nine months after graduation and just after his 19th birthday, Jack and his wife began to notice missing items of value. Along with forged checks, sentimental jewelry, two stringed instruments, gym equipment, and likely more had vanished.

Taylor was asked to leave the house. What happened the next six months is still unknown.

Rehab gives hope

Carrie was Taylor's first and true love. One day Carrie called Jack out of the blue. Carrie, who had been his girlfriend throughout high school, urged him to get Taylor and bring him home. "He's in really bad shape," she told Jack. "I heard through some people that he has gone off the rails," she said in a worried tone. Jack and the rest of his family, along with Carrie, decided to stage an intervention with Taylor.

A few days later after they had convinced him to meet with them, they checked him into a hospital, where he was detoxed. Because he was over 18 years old, they had to work through the courts to have him deemed a harm to himself so they obtain further help for him.

He checked into Bridges of Hope rehab center in south Georgia, where he would spend the next six months repairing his opiate-damaged brain and body.

Getting his boy back

“I finally started to see my boy come back,” said Jack after several Sundays of family visits on the six-hour trek to the rehab facility. “ We would bring him his favorite foods,” Jack remembered as his voice took an upbeat tone. “He looked amazing. He was fit and really tan from working in the watermelon fields near the rehab facility.” Even hearing Jack tell the story about this time, the warmth of his hope and refound happiness could be felt.

Home for the holidays

December 2009 was a great Christmas. Taylor came home from rehab. We opened gifts, and I remember distinctly how happy he was to be home, Joe recalled. “That’s my boy,” I said hugging him tightly. “I was happy. So very happy,” said Jack, “but I no longer had those huge dreams for him. I just wanted him to be well. To be happy. To be able to live a normal life.”

A father’s dream reimagined

Taylor was back at home again and the family was living with this new normal. Taylor was able to get a job at a store in the local mall. Life went on as life tends to do. Jack went back to his job at Coca-Cola, Sydney was back

at Auburn, and Aubrey was home in middle school. Sydney and Taylor were talking about maybe him going to a technical school, like maybe Chattahoochee Tech, so he could learn a solid skill and get a good restart on his life.

Months passed. Taylor's absence of opiates eventually turned into a dabble. A dabble grew, and once again Taylorr was using. This time he started dealing so he could make enough money and more to feed his habit. Jack noticed something was off, but dismissed his thoughts. Maybe thinking Taylor was using again was just too much to bear.

The overdose

By Thanksgiving nearly a year after he was back from rehab, Jack received a call from the Atlanta police that Taylor was found slumped over in his vehicle, apparently from an overdose. This was the worst Thanksgiving news Jack could have imagined. He rushed to the hospital to find Taylor on life support. "I thought I'd lost my boy," he said.

To everyone's shock, Taylor recovered with no apparent physical or mental damage. "It was a miracle," Jack recalled. "God had given him a new chance on life. I was feeling certain this would be our low and he would make it back."

A father imagines what the best is now

Things were different now. “What I would have considered low expectations were now my high expectations,” said Joe. “I wanted Taylor to get some type of job--any type of job--that would keep him stable.”

Taylor would overdose again before he moved to Brunswick, a coastal city near Savannah, GA. There he would have the support of a well-known rehab community. He started landscaping for a friend’s company and was getting back on his feet. He started talking to Carrie again. She was a student at Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. It wasn’t long before they talked about him moving up to New York so they could be together.

Soon Taylor was in New York City with Carrie.. The two were happy to be together again. But Carrie became so engrossed in her clothing designs and sketches that Taylor was left alone in the house by himself a lot. “He didn’t have the coping skills to deal with his feelings,” Jack said, referring to arrested development, or the period at which one begins an addiction and becomes frozen in time to that age.

The section of New York where the couple were living had been in the news as a top area for opiate addiction. It was easy for Taylor to get right back into using. A New York State Congressional representative had told 60 Minutes

that anywhere in this region someone could purchase a form of opiates within 15 minutes.

With Taylor's loneliness, not being adept to the dark and cold winter change from the South, and drugs being so readily available, it was only a matter of time that relapse was likely.

Another overdose

Carrie called Jack to tell him that Taylor was found at a redlight slumped over the wheel. A police officer had inserted the heart-rejuvenating Narcan, which had brought his precious organ pumping blood again.

It seemed it was time for Taylor to leave New York.

Jack and I went up to gather Taylor's larger items after he had left quickly. As we were going through some personal items, Jack's pride was evident as he was placing the baseball trophies in the moving truck one by one. Just before he placed the final tape across the already cut part on the top of the box, he said, "Look at this picture of his form," showing me a wooden frame with an image of Taylor frozen in a perfect stance inside the glass as he was hitting a baseball from the batter's box. "That's my boy," he said.

Back in Georgia

Taylor returned to Brunswick where the rehab community was strongest. This time he went to a different rehab facility. With hopes and a never-ending belief in his precious child, Jack dropped him off into the open arms of a growing community of opiate addicts who shared similar recovery and relapse journeys, from prescription painkillers to the less expensive and more readily available heroin.

Taylor did well and after six months was back out and working a steady landscaping job for a small company that specialized in the pristinely manicured and attention-demanding oceanfront homes on Saint Simons and other Georgia coastal towns.

So how was Taylor doing, I would ask Jack. The question was followed by various dramatic stories he had to share about Taylor's unfortunate luck. Still, he insisted he was not using, but rather just needed this or that to get him through until this or that.

For what seemed like a very long time, and maybe it was or wasn't, depending on one's life perspective, Taylor was on his own and demanding money several times a week.

The end of the boy

When it got to a point in February of this year that Jack could no longer, would no longer give him money, something may have happened to Taylor's psyche. Or maybe it was just the evolution of this continued street drug demand that led home manufacturers to become so greedy that they began to add a highly lethal but undetectable fentanyl into the powdery heroin mix.

Whatever the reason and one which we may never know, Taylor overdosed in the bathroom of his home in Brunswick one night before a shower soon after Jack's answers became "no."

Unlike other times, it was late at night and no one was around to save him. His naked, cold body with a shoelace tied around his ankle and a look of shock on his face as he must have struggled for his last breath were all that was left to decipher his last moment on this Earth.

The truth revealed

With the truth unveiled that Taylor had so painstakingly tried to keep hidden, the pure shock that it had all been lies was overwhelming to everyone as the caring couple who had a heart for recovering addicts revealed everything about Taylor's life that they shared with him.

It no longer mattered, but yet it did matter. Everyone had so much to overcome. The tragic loss of a son, brother, grandchild, stepson, friend, former boyfriend, and uncle. So many lives touched. The story of a father's never-ending hopes and dreams for his son. An addiction that ravaged his body. So much love for him, but yet all that love could not save him. Despite his feeding of his addiction daily, its evil grasp mercilessly devoured him in the end.