

Marijuana Broke My Son's Brain: A North Carolina family's journey to advocacy

by Catherine C. and Chrismon C.

A Stranger joined our family in 2018. I'm not exactly sure when, because he was sneaky; he looked like our son, but acted nothing like him. Gradually, this stranger became a permanent fixture in our family. We tried to be nice to him, even though he wasn't welcome AT ALL. He was mean. He said cruel and untrue things. His language was foul. He did despicable things. He accused us of doing terrible things- things he so vehemently believed, we started to question our own sanity.

Our Stranger was also dirty. He quit brushing his teeth. He took showers for hours, but didn't use soap or shampoo. He slept either all day, or not for days. He disappeared during meals, refusing to eat. His brother and sister began sleeping together in a locked room, fearful of his late-night wanderings. His siblings watched marijuana transform the older brother they once knew - the thoughtful, genius All-American athlete - into a complete stranger. We had no idea what was happening.

In November of his Freshman year, he had his first of two involuntary commitments. He was transported to the Emergency Department, where he stayed for 3 days, on a floor mattress, in paper pajamas, with a security guard outside his door. His 72 Hour hold was extended, so he was transported in handcuffs, by police car, to the local behavioral health hospital. It was there that the psychiatrist told us that he had tested positive for THC, and it was likely the cause of the psychotic break, and that the psychosis could pass, or it could last forever.

We had never heard of cannabis-induced psychosis (CIP) until that day. This is when we began to find out more. Through a mutual connection I found Laura Stack and her non-profit, Johnny's Ambassadors, which she had created in honor of her son who had died by suicide while in a CIP state. She had created this non-profit to educate others and create awareness about the harms of today's marijuana. I was shocked to learn there were so many others experiencing the same thing.

It was at this point that I realized, like Laura, that I could not let my son's condition be in vain, so I joined the Johnny's Ambassadors community and ultimately found Parent Action Network (PAN) through an advocacy opportunity they posted in that group. While I had been learning how to educate myself, my family and others, I had now discovered that there were other opportunities for advocating at a broader level - a legislative level - on marijuana legalization, where our story could impact our leaders' decisions. I knew this was something I wanted to - needed to do. I also considered that while I wanted to

tell our family's story, I also needed to protect my son and any chance for him to have a normal productive life.

Our daughter started to feel the same way. When she got to college, she watched teammates use marijuana as a crutch to cope with the pressures of Division I athletics.

Some of them lost their eligibility because of their addiction, and her brother missed out on the formative years of his young adulthood. She joined us in becoming advocates for educating others about the dangers of THC on developing brains.

We believe education is the most important counterbalance to the ever-growing marijuana industry. Both myself, my husband and our daughter want to use our voices to tell others about the real dangers of marijuana and protect more bright, young people from suffering from addiction. But we also want to protect our son.

While there are those who tragically can use their child's name and even their likeness in their awareness efforts because their children are no longer with us, there are many more like my family who have loved ones that are still struggling to recover and lead healthy lives. Those who aren't ready to have their name out there. The good news is there are so many ways to tell your story and protect your loved one at the same time!

Our family protects our son when we advocate in many ways. We always ask for his permission before sharing our story. Sometimes he says, "No, I'm not comfortable with that," and in some instances, he says, "Sure, that doesn't invade my privacy." Since he is more protective of his specific behaviors while in psychosis, we tend to use more general terms, when describing his experiences. We never use his name, and we sometimes don't use our last name.

Some of the ways we have participated without exposing our son's privacy include direct advocacy campaigns where with just one click we can reach our specific leaders. We can also write features like this and participate in webinars and even bigger events like PAN's Training Conference and Hill Day. We have participated in the Hill Day two years in a row, and my daughter joined me this year! PAN makes this and all opportunities possible and understands each family's comfort level. They make sure we feel safe and protected and never put us into a situation where we feel unprepared.

The marijuana industry preaches "safe and harmless" to the public, and they do it loudly. Few organizations push back against their false marketing, allowing their narrative to remain. A common lament we often hear when speaking to other parents is "I wish I had known." We will keep sharing our story until everyone knows.