

Drushane Teehee

Drushane Teehee lost her teenage son to suicide after struggling with severe asthma for most of his life and having many challenges getting treatment from the local healthcare system.



My son, Izaiah, was nine years old when he was first diagnosed with asthma. I didn't really know much about it. The doctors just said, "Oh, he has asthma" and gave him an albuterol inhaler. They gave him medication to take, too. He took it every now and then, but it was usually just the inhaler. That worked fine for a few years.

His asthma progressed when he became more active and involved with running and sports. It seemed like that's when it became harder for him to breathe. He also had allergies - our weather is crazy - nice one day, cold the next or hot and humid, or rainy, and it messed with his asthma. Then they thought he was allergic to cats, so we kept the cats away from him. They changed the inhaler to a different brand of albuterol and then added another inhaler.

He wasn't recommended to a specialist until he was 16, about a year before he passed away - we didn't even know what

a spirometer was until then. From the ages of 9 to 16 we had no knowledge about how he should be breathing or what his lungs should be doing. We use the Indian healthcare system, and in our health facility we are not given one specific doctor to see, just whoever is available or has an opening in the follow-up time frame. I remember a time when one doctor did tell my son to return in a week or two for a follow-up. We returned in that exact time, requested the same doctor, and then waited about six hours to see her. She was actually upset with us, because we had waited and hadn't just seen whoever was available. The treatment we received from some doctors made us feel that they just wanted to get us in and out without actually listening to the patient. From my experience, they would do an x-ray and if that was fine, that was it. It's as though they didn't want to do more testing. Izaiah was having more and more problems with his asthma that sent him to the emergency room several times within a couple weeks' time. The Indian hospital

Emergency Department has a policy, if you check in after 5 p.m., they determine whether it's an actual emergency. If it's not life or death, then they send you to urgent care. We didn't have any real care for the asthma - it was basically, "Here's an inhaler. Good luck."

Eventually he couldn't even go outside without having an attack, so he always had to have his inhalers. That's when they put him back on daily medication. And it seemed like it got worse after that, because that's when his lungs started swelling. I had him in the emergency room several times, and the doctor said his lungs were so swollen they were pushing up against his ribs.

His breathing was getting to him. He would get frustrated because he loved to run. He was pretty fast. He loved to do that. But then he started having attacks in the middle of races. He'd have to stop, try to regain his breath, and then he'd still push himself and finish. Afterwards, I'd have to take him to the emergency room because he couldn't breathe. He started running less and started staying inside more. He also led praise and worship at our church, but when he was singing, he would get short of breath, so he'd have to stop and play his bass. He was starting to play the keyboard, but he didn't have that mastered yet. Overall, Izaiah was very active in our community. He always helped with food banks, soup kitchens, always volunteered to help do stuff for other people.

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We had noticed he'd been short with people and we just thought he was aggravated with his asthma, or just being a teenager. He was a junior in high school, had straight A's, was class president, so there were really no signs we saw that we would associate with suicide. He was planning a mission trip to Costa Rica, raising money, and trying to sell shirts he designed for his trip, so he was still looking at the future. He had names picked out for his future kids, knew where he wanted to go to college. He was goal oriented. The morning that he died, he had been supposed to leave for Texas to lead praise and worship there. He had been out the night before with his friends, and when he came home, he just came in like he always did, said goodnight, and went up to his room. The next morning, we found him. It just didn't make sense at all. Because here's this kid that's going to Texas to lead praise and worship, he's going to Costa Rica, it's the end of his junior year,

he'd just been elected class president for his senior year. He had all these things going for him, and then he was just gone. We had never been told about the mental health elements that can come with asthma or told about the possible side-effects of his medications, and I just kept thinking, "Why my boy? Why my son?"

It's the hardest thing in the world to get up every day and continue, so that his life, his death is not in vain. This hurt my child so I'm going to fight against it to help another family, so they don't have to go through what I've gone through. The good thing is, since we have a tribe clinic, I have my tribal council members helping me to make sure doctors know about this aspect of asthma and its treatment. I work with an advocacy group that recently got an FDA black box warning for serious mental health side effects added to one of his medications. I'm just hoping that people's lives will be saved, and that other families won't have to bury their child. It changes you. You'll never be the same again.

Izaiah is still helping other people. He wanted to be a missionary, he wanted to be a doctor, he wanted to be president. I always knew he was going to change the world somehow; I just thought he would be here to do it. I thought he would be able to see it himself, instead of going through me to get it done for him, but anything for that boy. ■

Asthma

Asthma is a chronic disease that affects the airways of your lungs. When you have asthma, your airways become swollen. This swelling (inflammation) causes the airways to make thick, sticky secretions called mucus. Asthma also causes the muscles in and around your airways to get very tight or constrict. This swelling, mucus, and tight muscles can make your airways narrower than normal and it becomes very hard for you to get air into and out of your lungs. Frequent lung or sinus infections can cause asthma. Irritants that can also cause asthma are:

- Exhaust fumes from cars, buses, trucks etc.
- Chemicals like garden sprays
- Molds and dust
- Strong odors from paint, perfumes, colognes, hair spray, deodorants, and cleaning products
- Tobacco smoke from cigarettes, pipes, or cigars
- Temperature or weather changes
- Stress or exercise
- Medications, including aspirin and betablockers (heart or blood pressure medicine)
- Sulfites in foods such as dried fruits, wine and beer



Learn more

ATS Patient Education Series.
"What is Asthma?" New York, NY.

www.thoracic.org/patients/patient-resources/resources/asthma.pdf