

Dad's tragic loss inspired Chandler opioid help

By WAYNE SCHUTSKY
Staff

Opiate addiction is a nationwide epidemic that claimed over 40,000 lives in 2016, and Gilbert father Randy Melle knows first-hand that the casualties of those overdoses are not the only victims.

Each death leaves behind family members and friends who must figure out how to heal and move on following these tragic events.

Melle is one of those surviving victims. He lost his son Adam to a heroin overdose in 2016 – a mere 18 hours after Adam had arrived home from a month-long treatment program.

As a board member of the Chandler I AM Project, Melle is using his personal experiences to help other families avoid the same fate.

"Any dad, any parent that goes through what we went through, my heart goes out to them," he said. "There's nothing worse than getting your son out of 32 days of treatment, getting home and 18 hours later two Sheriff's Department (officers) show up at your house."

The project is exceptionally personal for Melle, because it is also literally a way to keep his son's memory alive.

Shortly after joining the group, he found out that it was in search of a new name, so he suggested I AM – representing his son's initials.

The name has a dual meaning as "I AM" is also a reference to the idea that while addiction can afflict anyone, it is only one aspect of their identity.

For example, someone could say "I am a salesman and I am also an addict...It incorporates everyone into that circle," Melle said.

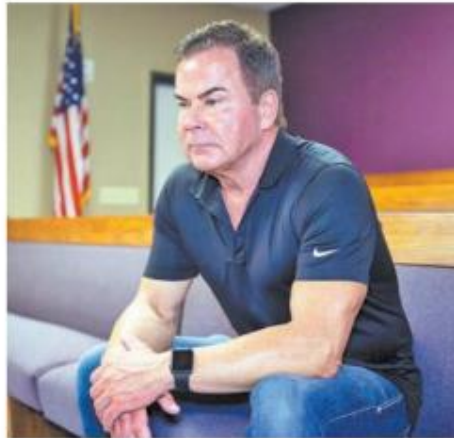
The rest of the group loved the idea it embodied and adopted the moniker moving forward.

The concept the name represents is an important one for Melle as he works to dispel the myths and misinformation that surround addiction.

"Addiction is not specific to any gender or any ethnicity. It is not specific to wealthy people or people who don't have money," he said. "It hits every one of our families."

He knows that lesson all too well.

After Adam's death, the newspaper The Forum of Fargo-Moorhead – the



Special to Santan Sun News
Randy Melle started a Chandler-based opioid addiction treatment program after his son died of an overdose less than a day after leaving a month-long treatment program.

Melle's moved to Arizona from Fargo, N.D. – ran an article stating that Adam Melle was one of five former Fargo South High School students who died of drug overdoses within a couple months.

Through his work with the Chandler I AM Project, Melle hopes he can inspire families to seek help on behalf of their loved ones who are struggling with drug addiction, because too many families are afraid to address the problems head on due to the negative social implications that addiction carries.

"I'm one parent and to all the parents and family members who are afraid to admit that they have a loved one with an opiate problem, people need to know that there is help and there is hope for those people," he said.

He added, "Don't be afraid to discuss any drug problem that you have with family. Don't try to hide the fact that you might have a family member or a loved one who is an addict. Do everything that you can to help them to save a life and to save the person. It is really nothing to be ashamed of."

Melle also stressed the importance of engaging with the community and convincing them that supporting

program's like Chandler I AM is worthwhile, because the project is primarily supported by donations.

That can be an uphill battle, though, as many people have a negative perception of drug addicts.

"The misconception most people have, especially if you're a heroin addict, is why should we care about you?" he said.

Melle combats this mindset by communicating that addiction is a disease, not a choice.

"I can't explain addiction to you other than saying you don't wake up one morning and say you want to be an alcoholic or an addict."

He also stressed that the cost to fund the program pales in comparison to the financial burden the opioid epidemic has put on Arizona and the nation. The opioid crisis cost the country \$504 billion in 2015 alone, according to White House estimates.

Melle, his wife and three daughters knew they wanted to do more to combat the disease that took their son and brother's life. They considered starting their own charity but ultimately looked for an existing organization to help.

Melle asked a counselor at the treatment center Adam had attended for suggestions. The counselor said he should attend a meeting of the organization that would become the Chandler I AM project, which included members of the Chandler Police Department and other local groups interested in providing resources for addicts seeking help.

"After the first meeting I knew this was a group that I wanted to get involved with," he said.

He added, "Everyone had the same agenda that I have, which is to find a way to help people and not sit on our

thumbs and do nothing. There is an opiate addiction out there," he said.

The project is based out of Chandler Presbyterian Church and partners with treatment centers from around the Valley to provide a safe space where addicts can find the support and treatment options.

The Chandler I AM Project holds intakes every Tuesday from 1 to 5 p.m. at Chandler Presbyterian Church, 1900 S. Arrowhead Drive. Volunteers from local treatment organizations are on hand to provide assessments and referrals for treatment.

Program representatives can also be reached on call at 480-382-9855.

The program also provides scholarships for those who do not have insurance or otherwise cannot afford treatment.

"We have helped out others who wouldn't have gotten into a good treatment center had they not come to our organization, and we got them into treatment centers faster than they would have on their own," Melle said.

Melle credited the Chandler Police Department for providing support for the program since its inception.

Melle said he immediately felt a kinship with Chandler Police Department Assistant Chief Dale Walters and Commander Edward Upshaw, both of whom serve on Chandler I AM's Board of Directors.

And he credits all the board members with committing to put the lion's share of donated funds towards treatment for patients.

"We all have the same open heart for helping drug addicts and especially opiate addicts, because that is where the epidemic is," Melle said.

He said that over 95 percent of the donated money goes towards treatment while a small amount is used for marketing the program.

Outside of the Chandler I AM Project itself, Melle is more than willing to share his story with anyone who needs advice.

"If any parent has any questions about a family member or what they can do, I would gladly give them my phone number and tell them what I've been through and what the last two years has been like, and what they can do to avoid a catastrophe like we had."

Donations to the Chandler I AM Project can be made through the program's website at chandleriamproject.org/donate. ■