

# Sebastopol couple dedicated to ending stigma of addiction



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“I don’t know if he’s alive. ... I don’t know if he’s breathing.”

After hearing these words on the other end of a phone line, Micah Sawyer rushed to his son, Micah Jr., with his wife Michelle. Micah Jr. had been found unconscious by his mother, Denise Hamlow, on that summer morning in 2019.

But before they could reach him, Denise called them to tell them their son had died.

Micah Jr. had struggled with a heroin addiction but while living with his mother had managed almost seven months of sobriety when he relapsed and overdosed on fentanyl, a synthetic opioid 50 to 100 times more potent than morphine.

The 22-year-old was captain of his high school football team, popular and loved by his parents. Unlike some who struggle with drug addiction, he didn’t have a history of addiction in his family.

Yet on that summer morning in 2019, the Sawyer family of Sebastopol and Hamlow lost their beloved son, best friend and loyal brother.

“I felt helpless. It was so hard,” his father, Micah Sawyer, said. “You know, it’s just crazy — everything else in our lives I could always fix, but I couldn’t fix this. ... I couldn’t save him.”

Yet for all its heartbreak, that day propelled the Sawyers, with an intention to honor Micah Jr.'s life and heal, to create [Micah's Hugs, a nonprofit](#) with a mission to end the stigma of addiction and mental illness by bringing awareness through community education and providing resources for those in need.

For the Sawyers' dedication to helping others and combating the stigma of addiction, they've been selected to receive the North Bay Spirit Award for December. A joint project of The Press Democrat and Comcast, the award highlights volunteers who demonstrate exceptional initiative for a cause, often identifying a need in the community and finding an enterprising way to fill it.

In the last year, Micah's Hugs (Micah Jr. often embraced family and friends with warm "bear hugs") has given 17 people struggling with addiction scholarships for six weeks of recovery services at Pura Vida, a drug rehabilitation program in Santa Rosa.

Micah's Hugs focuses not just on addiction recovery, but also on reducing harm, by training volunteers or community members how to use Narcan nasal spray, a life-saving emergency treatment that can reverse an opioid overdose. The nonprofit also hands out fentanyl testing strips to the community, especially to homeless people, and plans to present an educational film in Sonoma County schools to teach students about drug addiction prevention and mental illness.

*"If I didn't get that scholarship ... I probably would've never made it, to be honest. They saved my life."* Justina Holguin

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One scholarship recipient is Justina Holguin. She was once addicted to cocaine and alcohol, but since Micah's Hugs took her under their wing, she's been sober for 11 months.

"If I didn't get that scholarship ... I probably would've never made it, to be honest," Holguin said. "They saved my life."

The Sawyers first met Holguin in March 2020 at a sober living home, where they were looking for people to interview for their educational film. She volunteered to share her story with them that day.

Nearly a year later, Holguin is working as a counselor at Pura Vida.

For the Sawyers, learning how Micah's Hugs has helped others is the most meaningful part of what they do.

"Hearing about how we impacted (Holguin) is the most fulfilling part of this work," Michelle Sawyer said. "Seeing the work come into fruition, it just means so much. Getting clean is not an easy task. We were touched by her story."

## Ending the stigma

Inside the Sawyer's Sebastopol home, Micah Jr.'s bright blue football jersey — number 64 — is framed and displayed with a photo of him proudly holding his helmet in the air.

He was captain of the football team at Analy High School. He loved tacos. His friends adored him. He was protective of those he loved and could spark a conversation with just about anyone. He grew up in a supportive, loving family.

But behind closed doors, he was battling a heroin addiction.

“People think that if you’re a drug addict, then you must be struggling in school, have no friends and come from a family of addicts,” Micah Sawyer said. “But my son didn’t fit any of those cliches. It’s important that people understand that it can happen to anyone, no matter their background. We want to break the black cloud that hovers over addiction.”

In 2019, as Micah Jr.’s funeral approached, the family asked loved ones to send donations instead of flowers through Facebook, Venmo and GoFundMe, to raise money for resources to help people recovering from addiction. After massive support from the community, Micah’s Hugs officially became a nonprofit in November 2020.

Now, the 11-member organization is devoted to providing addiction recovery resources and educating the community about drug addiction and overdose prevention.

“We want there to be less shame around being an addict, so that people actually feel comfortable to seek help” Michelle Sawyer said. “We can’t tell people to not use drugs — that’s unrealistic. But if we can help get the resources to help someone recover or educate someone on how to prevent and treat drug overdose, then we’ll do that.”



*Michelle Sawyer, right, and husband Micah, center, founders of the new nonprofit Micah’s Hugs, hand out coffee, doughnuts, fentanyl test kits and fleece sweaters to residents at a homeless encampment off Roberts Lake Road in Rohnert Park, Calif., on Tuesday, Dec. 14, 2021. (Beth Schlanker/The Press Democrat)*

## Educating the youth

Micah first noticed signs of his son’s addiction in 2018. He’d arrive hours late for work at his dad’s construction company. Other days he wouldn’t show up at all. Once he was found asleep while operating a tractor. He’d sometimes go days without calling any of his family.



Then, things escalated.

Micah Jr. didn't show up to his sister's birthday party until several hours after it started. When he did arrive, he was going through withdrawal, sweating and in pain.

He had been looking for heroin, just enough to function at the party.

"He looked at me and said, 'Look at me, I'm f---ing detoxing,'" Micah Sawyer remembered. "That was the first time he was vulnerable about how severe his addiction was.

*"Trying to save him became my addiction. Sometimes I'd find him asleep in a car in some alleyway and all I'd want to do is cry and hold him."* Micah Sawyer

"At first I wanted to make sure he wasn't showing up on drugs to family events, but then you realize he has to be. When you're far into an addiction, you need that drug to stay level or else you're dealing with painful withdrawal. Addiction isn't black and white."

Micah Sawyer remembers lying awake at night staring at the ceiling, wondering if his son would make it home safely. He kept an Excel spreadsheet tracking all of Micah Jr.'s hideaway spots and spent hours driving and looking for him in the streets.

"Trying to save him became my addiction," Micah Sawyer said. "Sometimes I'd find him asleep in a car in some alleyway and all I'd want to do is cry and hold him."

The Sawyers know the path to recovery is long and complicated and can't happen overnight. That's why they're creating their educational film, which they plan to present next year for schools and organizations across Sonoma County.



*Michelle Sawyer, co-founder of the new nonprofit Micah's Hugs, hands out coffee and doughnuts at a homeless encampment off Roberts Lake Road in Rohnert Park, Calif., on Tuesday, Dec. 14, 2021. (Beth Schlanker/The Press Democrat)*

The film features interviews with people they've helped through recovery, Micah Jr.'s friends and their family members, all to emphasize that addiction can affect anyone, no matter their background, the Sawyers said.

"I grew up with Poopie (Denise's nickname for Micah Jr.) and watched what happened to him," said Gianna "Gigi" Pendleton, his stepsister and the treasurer of Micah's Hugs.

"It was so hard. But turning a bad disaster into a happy thing by spreading resources to homeless people has opened my eyes. This organization means a lot to me and helps all of us grieve."

## **A family dedicated to serving others**

Micah's Hugs may be their main passion, but community service is second nature for the Sawyers.

Michelle grew up participating in 4-H and Future Farmers of America in Tomales. She volunteered at retirement homes and with the homeless. For several years at Catholic Charities, she helped out with clothing drives, petting zoos for kids and Alzheimer's patients and Thanksgiving dinners.

Micah, a big supporter of youth sports programs in Sebastopol, helped raise money for the new field at Analy High School. He's the person who "fills the gaps" and offers help where it's needed, he admitted, laughing.

They agree that now their passion for helping others has evolved into something bigger than they had ever imagined.

"A big part of this organization is honoring Micah and helping people feel less alone. Through helping others, it helps us grieve and heal," the Sawyers said. "Wherever someone needs help, we'll be there."

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