

# DON'T BE IN THE DARK ABOUT LEGAL HIGHS.



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## Driven by loss

Fiona Spargo-Mabbs, Anne-Marie Cockburn and Maryon Stewart were all left shocked and grief stricken when their children died after taking drugs. But they all have something else in common too. They are campaigning and agitating to make sure other parents do not have to go through what they did. By **Max Daly**

Daniel Spargo-Mabbs was 16 when he took ecstasy for the first time on January 17, on his way to an illegal rave on an industrial estate in west London. He had told his mother, Fiona, he was going to a party near the family home in Croydon, south east London. The drug caused his body temperature to rise to 42 degrees.

Each of his internal organs and systems stopped functioning in turn over the next few hours.

“By the time he was transferred to a specialist liver intensive care unit that Saturday afternoon, his lungs, liver, kidneys, heart and circulatory system had all failed,” says Fiona. “We sat with

him over the next two days and watched him slowly die. We were in complete shock and trauma, and still are to a great extent. It was all too hard to process. When Daniel died, part of us also died.”

Daniel’s sudden death meant Fiona and husband Tim found themselves in the middle of a media storm. They had

to make a quick decision – did they pull the shutters down to deal with their grief in private, or did they risk exposing their raw emotions in public in order to send some kind of message?

“The level of media interest immediately following Dan’s death took us completely by surprise,” says Fiona. “But we decided we needed to talk, to tell other people about the risks out there to children and young people. We had such a sense that if this had got Dan, then it could get almost anyone, and we felt driven to warn people, to do anything we could to stop this happening to another family, and so we took every opportunity to speak out that came our way, and have continued to do so.”

A week after Dan’s death, friends of Fiona and Tim, who are committed Christians, suggested they should start a charity to consolidate their message about the risks of drugs. So they began the process of setting up the Daniel Spargo-Mabbs Foundation, with the support of family, friends, the church and the wider community.

Fiona, a manager in adult education at Croydon Council and her husband Tim, a learning disability charity worker, decided to focus on education, both in and out of school, as the primary means of making change. They are planning a three-pronged approach: a peer mentoring programme for teenagers, workshops for parents and extra training for teachers. They also want to support schools to provide drug education that is more embedded and longer-term than it is at present. “We know that one-off interventions that present shocking facts can be very effective, but usually only in the short-term,” says Fiona.

“This is still very early days for us in every sense,” says Fiona. “Dan died only six months ago, we’ve been spending the last few months doing a lot of groundwork, talking to specialists and other related charities and professionals, finding out what’s out there already, gathering information and building links.”

Last term they delivered Personal and Social Development sessions to a few hundred year 9 and 10 pupils locally, which have had a really positive response from both pupils and teachers. They will be working with around 165 year 11s after their GCSEs this summer, from schools across Croydon and Sutton, and hope to send at least some of them back into their schools or sixth form colleges as ambassadors for the Foundation.

They have just signed contracts with award-winning playwright Mark

Wheeler, who they have commissioned to write a play about Dan’s story. They also plan to work with university students and set up under age club nights. In terms of policy, they want effective drugs education as a statutory requirement for all schools.

Fiona and Tim are part of a growing number of parents – including Jim Lee, the father of Nancy Lee, 23, who died after a long term ketamine use in March, Anne-Marie Cockburn, the mother of Martha, 15, who died after taking highly pure MDMA in July last year, and Maryon Stewart, whose daughter Hester, 21, died after taking GBL in 2009 – who have decided to speak out and take action after the deaths of their children from ‘party drugs’.

## REGARDLESS OF THE DIFFERENT AVENUES WE HAVE GONE DOWN, THE PARENTS OF CHILDREN WHO HAVE DIED FROM DRUGS HAVE THE SAME GOAL: WE ALL WANT TO AVOID SOMEONE ELSE BEING IN THE SAME POSITION AS US

They are not the first. The parents of Leah Betts, who died after taking ecstasy on her 18th birthday in 1995, famously called for her drug supplier to be sent to the gallows. Their campaign sparked a hard-hitting anti-drugs movement, but was abandoned 10 years later when they declared they had been betrayed by the government.

Anne-Marie Cockburn came to a very different conclusion after the death of her daughter. Within a week of Martha’s death from snorting half a gram of highly pure crystal MDMA, Anne-Marie began trawling the internet. She says she was desperate to learn as much as possible on the issue of drugs – a world in which she had so suddenly been plunged.

“A lot of our knowledge about drugs is fed by sensationalist headlines, it’s basically propaganda,” she says. She discovered that behind the political rhetoric, the newspaper stories and the “overly loud” voices of ex-addicts calling for zero tolerance, there is a wealth of robust research on what works and what

doesn’t. “So I decided to look at best practice around the world. I would love to live in a perfect world where no one takes drugs, but they do. The recreational drugs industry is huge because of the demand.

“The conclusion I came to was to take a sensible approach, based on realism and regulation, safeguarding and harm reduction. Everyone bangs on about drug education, but if a drug hasn’t got a label on the bottle, what’s the point?”

She says not all parents in her position have reached the same conclusion, but they are driven by a similar wish. “Regardless of the different avenues we have gone down, the parents of children who have died from drugs have the same goal: we all want to avoid someone else being in the same position as us,” says Anne-Marie.

Over the last year, Anne-Marie, who was a single mother to Martha, has expressed herself in a series of calm, eloquent and powerful interviews in the national press. She has also published a book, *5,742 Days*. “I was offered media training but I didn’t want to have it. What I say is authentic and I want to get my message to normal people.”

Grief is still a big part of her life. “There is nothing more motivating than the agony of loss to get me out of bed every morning.” But she says her views are borne out of rationality rather than anger. “This is about being peaceful and having a conversation. I’ve been to too many meetings with polarised debate, just noise. Sometimes a very quiet voice carries in the wind.”

Anne-Marie wants all psychoactive drugs to be treated like pharmaceuticals – regulated and labeled, accompanied by drug education to inform and encourage children not to go down the drug route. Until then she wants drug testing facilities to be readily available.

What has most surprised her during her journey since Martha’s death one year ago? “When I speak to people who believe in prohibition, within five minutes they have changed their mind. They are not being polite, it’s just that most people do not know the basic facts.”

Now she has had her say in the media, she feels the time is ripe to take on the politicians, whom she accuses of using prohibition as a way of “shoving everything under the table”.

“Prohibitionists can spout any statistics. But come with me and stand by Martha’s grave and tell me prohibition works. I will write to Theresa May and David Cameron. I want to make politicians feel incredibly uncomfortable.



But I will not let them meet me and pat me on the arm and offer me a nice cup of tea. I want to ask them – what are you going to do about it?”

Maryon Stewart has five years experience dealing with the government and its drug policy. Since her daughter Hester took GBL and died in 2009, she has become the unofficial but highly organised flag bearer in the fight against legal highs. When Hester died, very few people had heard of legal highs and mephedrone was yet to hit the mainstream. She started campaigning in a knowledge vacuum.

So while Fiona is focused on education and Anne-Marie is calling for a complete overhaul of our drugs laws, Maryon and her charity the Angelus Foundation has homed-in on the issue of legal highs. As with the other two, the death of her daughter came out of nowhere.

“It’s a surreal situation to be in, even over time it doesn’t sink in that your son or daughter is not coming back again. If you use drugs repeatedly then you expect the worst, but for Hester, a cheerleader who studied molecular medicine at Sussex University, it wasn’t supposed to be like that,” says Maryon, a well-known nutritionist.

Already well acquainted with some national paper and TV journalists,

Maryon, was whisked off to a hotel by one newspaper to escape the media, which was camped outside her front door.

“I have spoken to other parents and we all agree, had there been an awareness campaign about drugs, then our children would probably all still be alive,” she says. “The reason I started to campaign is that I wanted desperately that other parents would not have to go through the same nightmare.”

Within a fortnight of her daughter’s death, Maryon had sent a letter to home secretary Jacqui Smith demanding why the government had not taken the advice of experts and banned GBL. But the day before she was due to meet the home secretary she resigned. Instead she saw her successor Alan Johnson, whose initial eagerness to help was stymied by red tape. Because GBL is used to make paint stripper, fear from getting sued by paint stripper firms ensured the ban was delayed by six months.

And this has been the story so far for Maryon in terms of changing government policy. She says progress has been “woeful”. A review into ‘legal highs’ set up by drug minister Norman Baker is due to report in September. Despite her dismay, the Angelus Foundation has been prolific, being involved in spreading awareness about the dangers

of ‘legal highs’ in the form of newspaper campaigns, short educational films and the Why Not Find Out website. In May music fans visiting the homepages of the UK’s main music festivals saw a black window except for a grey light bulb and the message “Don’t be in the dark about legal highs”.

Maryon believes proper education and inter-departmental strategy is needed. She says the New Zealand experiment, to regulate legal high makers, was a promising idea but has been derailed by bad implementation.

“Kids want to have fun and don’t want to mess up their lives. A lot of them are not risk takers but they are being made to take risks,” says Maryon.

“Politicians pay lip service to the issue of ‘legal highs’ at meetings. But I don’t think any of them think it is important enough. Only until they lose a child will they take it seriously. I have letters from David Cameron and Nick Clegg promising action, but it just isn’t happening. How much longer is it going to take?”

[www.angelusfoundation.com](http://www.angelusfoundation.com)  
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