

‘Days before he died he told us marijuana had ruined his life’ – Laura Stack on losing her son to addiction

Laura Stack’s oldest child Johnny died by suicide in 2019 after years of struggling with cannabis-induced psychosis. Now she travels the world warning young people of the dangers of a drug that is considered harmless by many, writes *Kirsty Blake Knox*

Laura and John Stack will never forget the call at the door on November 20, 2019. “We got woken up at one in the morning,” Laura Stack says. “And the coroner was there, and the police officer told us, ‘Mr and Mrs Stack, your son is deceased’. You can’t ever prepare for anything like that... it was just hell. It was the worst day of our lives.”

Their oldest son Johnny had died by suicide at the age of 19 after a five year battle with high potency marijuana addiction.

“He told us, three days before he died, that the marijuana had ruined his mind and his life, and that he was sorry and he loved us,” she says.

Six months after his death, the husband and

wife established a non-profit organisation in his honour called Johnny’s Ambassadors to educate others about the dangers of marijuana addiction.

“We thought, ‘we’re going to have to go tell other young people what he told us because he’s not here to tell them’”

Laura Stack is in a brightly lit room in the Royal College of Surgeons Ireland. She is the keynote speaker at a lecture taking place that evening called Cannabis and Young Minds.

Her husband John watches on as she discusses how quickly her son’s use of high-potency marijuana turned into addiction. She is friendly and focused, determined to speak to as

many people as possible. To date, she says she has shared Johnny's story with over 500,000 students.

The Stack family are from Colorado and in 2014, their state became one of the first places in the US to license retail sales of the drug. It was around this time Johnny started using.

Growing up, he had been an outgoing, funny and bright student. He was naturally athletic and involved in the community and the church.

"Johnny was brilliant. He tested as a genius," Stack says. "He got a perfect score in Math for our college entrance exam. It's very, very, very hard to do, very difficult."

At the age of 14, at a party, Johnny first inhaled cannabis. When Stack discovered this, she "did the mom thing".

She chastised him and told him not to do so again. But in truth, she had no idea the path of addiction her son was beginning to venture down and where it would tragically end.

She was unaware of the increasing potency of the drug and the availability of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) – the main psychoactive substance found in cannabis – or the different ways it could be consumed (vapes and waxes).

"I used it when I was 17... I would smoke a little weed," she says. "And I just kind of thought, it's just weed. It's no big deal. And didn't hurt me, it's not going to hurt him. I had no idea about the products that are available... I just didn't have any idea."

Within five years, Johnny's consumption of high-potency marijuana would intensify, leading to psychosis and severe mental health issues. As his addiction intensified, his personality began to shift – he became abusive.

"We call it the unravelling," says Stack, who has written a 300-page book about her son's addiction. "It's kind of like an alien coming down and taking your child and putting another one [there]. He was very mean. And he used to be so loving and sweet. He would call me names. He was very verbally abusive."

"He pushed me a couple times... he was just toxic... we were afraid of him. We had locks on our bedroom doors. We kept him away from knives. He was scary."

When he turned 17, his problems became worse. "It really started getting bad. He would run away for two weeks at a time. He would use it right in front of us, and then he moved out."

He suffered from paranoia, suicidal ideation and was concerned people were "out to get him" or that his computer had been bugged.

"We tried really hard to find him help. But this was in the early days and nobody believed that it was addictive... but we had him genetically tested, medically tested."

"He didn't have any of the gene clusters for schizophrenia. He never tested positive for anything but THC. They finally just diagnosed him

with... now they call it cannabis-induced psychosis. But back then, they didn't really kind of have a name for it."

During the five years that Johnny was taking cannabis concentrate, there were periods of sobriety.

"When he stopped, then he would be normal. And we'd be like, 'You have to stop using this'. And he would be sober for a period of time, and he would be OK."

But then, sadly, he would begin using again.

"He lost two scholarships to college. I mean, it was just a nightmare, just on and off, and on and off, and on and off. He just couldn't stay away from it."

In the days before his death, Johnny appeared to be doing well.

"He was normal. In the end, he knew it was the weed [causing his problems]. We went to [restaurant] Red Robin, had burgers. He got his oil changed in his car. He went to a doctor's appointment," Stack says. "No indication. He was sober. He seemed perfectly normal."

But in November, 2019, Johnny died by suicide. "There's a video of him. A video we [his family] will never watch. It was a public video in a car park and he jumped off a six-storey building. And they said that it looked like he thought he was going to fly, that he thought he could just fly off the building..."

She describes Johnny's death as "a waste". "It's tragic and it didn't have to happen. We really just feel that it's pretty unfortunate that Colorado legalised and that we were right in the thick of it... and there he was in high school and he got caught up in all this. We really think that if he hadn't started using it, he'd still be here."

Johnny's death occurred just as Covid hit and the world closed down, which made the grieving process very intense for his parents.

"We were alone... It was just a living nightmare. Everything was cancelled and we couldn't go anywhere."

Before her son's death, Stack worked as a time productivity expert. She had written several books on the subject, so in the weeks and months after his death, she began to write.

"I just journalled and looked through all his papers, all his blogs... I learned so much."

She spoke to experts, studied data, read research papers and established Johnny's Ambassadors.

Many parents are unaware of the danger of cannabis consumption, she says, or the range of products on the market and their potency.

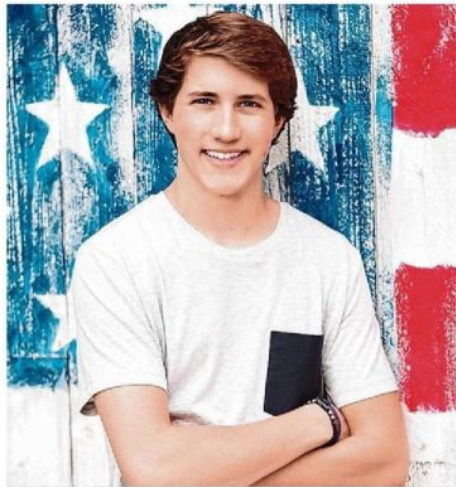
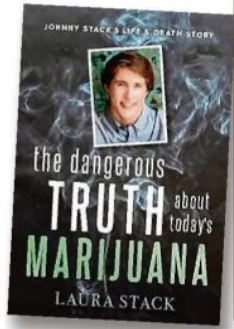
"I consider myself a worldly, educated person. I have an MBA. I've flown three million miles in my lifetime... and I didn't know. Nobody really understands what's happening... it's really an effort to educate teens... to tell them, 'Look, this stuff is harmful...' We show them data. We show them research."

She says now, five years on, she can discuss her son's death without crying and that traveling and educating others has given her a sense of purpose.

"For us, it's very healing because we feel we were so wrong, and we were just so uneducated. We can't save our son, but his life is saving others."

If you have been affected by any of the issues raised in this article, freephone the HSE Drugs and Alcohol Helpline on 1800 459 459 or email helpline@hse.ie; or freephone the Samaritans on 116 123, email jo@samaritans.ie; or freephone Pieta on 1800 247 247 or text HELP to 51444

"It's kind of like an alien coming down and taking your child and putting another one there"



Johnny Stack first took cannabis aged 14.

Photo: Vision Photography



Laura Stack says marijuana addiction changed her son's personality. Photo: Gerry Mooney