

# ADDICTION

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“It looked like he was sleeping,” she said. “I even said to him, ‘Derek get up, you gotta get to work.’”

But when Kris reached out and touched her son, she recoiled. His body was cold and stiff, and his skin was gray.

“It hit me he was dead,” she said, fighting back tears. “He overdosed on heroin.”

That day replays in Kris’ mind like a broken record every day, all day – engraved into her memory.

“I was mad at him,” she admitted. “I was so mad.”

Kris, a former U.S. Customs and Border Patrol International Falls port director, spent the rest of the afternoon in a neighbor’s apartment crying, making calls and breaking the news to family and friends.

“I wasn’t alone,” she said. “(My other son) Don and his partner were with me. It was so hard for all of us.”

Kris said her anger at Derek boiled within her months after his death. She struggled with nightmares and sleepless nights, until finally, she managed to find peace.

“I stayed mad at him until his birthday in January,” she said. “On his birthday, I wrote to him... telling him I couldn’t be mad anymore. He hated when we were mad at him.”

**No discrimination**

The Lessard family learned drug addiction doesn’t discriminate. Users aren’t always uneducated, poor, immoral or bad people. Derek had a four-year college degree, came from parents who were both gainfully employed and have been married for more than 30 years, and he didn’t have a criminal history. Kris and Tim said they assume Derek never intended to become an addict, yet naiveté and curiosity led him down the path that eventually claimed his life.

“His curiosity drove him right to the edge,” Kris said, shaking her head. “He thought he could handle it.”

Derek, a 2005 Falls High School graduate, left International Falls shortly after graduation to attend the University of Massachusetts Boston for a

year before transferring to Georgetown University in Washington D.C. He had set his goals high.

“He wanted to be a hometown hero,” Kris said, glancing at a framed photo of her two sons — best friends — on her dining room table. “He wanted his poetry to be published.”

Derek was still very much a small-town boy who in 2008 confessed to his parents he was struggling with an addiction to prescription drugs.

“I wanted him to go to treatment right away,” Kris said. “But, he said he could handle it.”

The battle only intensified.

“He was under the wire there for a little while,” Tim, a longtime Ranier resident and pilot, said. “He had enough money to hold the bills back, but the debt on his credit card starting piling up.”

**‘Just a mess’**

Kris boasted her children were her favorite people to be around and said she became frustrated when Derek’s personality began to change – for the worse.

“We wouldn’t hear from him for weeks,” she said. “The more he got into using drugs, the more distant he became.”

Tim said his son carried a lot of anger and would regularly pile blame for his hardships on those close to and around him.

In 2009, the family reunited in D.C. for Derek’s college graduation. What should have been a joyful time to celebrate Derek’s accomplishments was “just a mess.”

“We approached him again about getting help, but he insisted he could handle it,” Kris said. “There wasn’t much we could do.”

**Rock bottom**

In 2010, Derek was unemployed, had no money, and was living in a “rough” neighborhood. He had drugs and trouble at his fingertips.


“He hit rock bottom,” Kris said.

Fearful any money they sent him would be spent on drugs, Kris and Tim would send boxes of food to their troubled son.

“We kind of cut him off,” Tim said.

Kris said she reached a

## “Borderland” by Derek Lessard



Derek Lessard

June 30, 2007, at 11:23am  
Home is hard to let go of.  
Never let lots of tea,  
Alcohol, drugs or caffeine  
Tell you otherwise.  
If I’m always glad  
It’s a lesson I learned early  
Why do I always find myself  
Having to relearn it?  
When you miss it most,  
It wants nothing of you  
When you finally want  
To leave it for good,  
It wants you to stay forever.  
This is how goes  
Your typical tale  
Of home and stead,  
A leg-dragging, circular story  
Of mutually broken hearts.  
You stumble over  
Fallen pine cones,  
And it’s a shame  
Christmas is so far away  
For those would look so perfect  
On the greensleeves of our tree  
And I wouldn’t  
Have to rake my lawn  
Before fall comes,  
Having illegal bonfires  
While feeling the cold eye  
Of that ranger tower  
Bore a hole in my forehead,  
Starting its own forest fire  
And blaming me for it.  
Standing on its tippy toes  
Like a feverish little squirrel,  
Looming over the treeline,  
Peering at the turrets of smoke  
Rising from my yard,  
As I stare across  
A mid-river boundary,  
Separating nation from nationality  
Cleaving dual citizenship  
Right down the middle  
And across the lake,  
A star scintillates  
In a crepuscular sky,  
Eerie twinkles coruscate.  
Will I ever  
Make it home?

*Kris’ note: This poem reflects how much Derek loved this area, and the common experience of young people who can’t wait to leave their small hometown for the big city, and then can’t wait to go home. Derek wanted to become a published poet and his family is working with an editor to make his dream come true.*

point of such anger, she told Derek he was responsible for getting himself out of the mess he had created with his life. Looking back, she admits that advice may have been a mistake, but it ultimately may have led him to seek help.

**Rebuilding**

In fall of 2010, Derek made plans to spend a few weeks in his hometown – something he rarely did. Before arriving, Kris warned her son she’d be going through his luggage and if any drugs or para-

phernalia was found, he would be on the next flight back to D.C.

Derek’s luggage was clean, but he wasn’t. Kris’ brother stopped by the house one afternoon to find Derek using.

“My brother told me Derek needs help now,” Kris said. “He said Derek was either going to wind up in jail or dead.”

This time, Derek knew he bit off more than he could chew and began searching for rehabilitation centers in D.C. He

found one on a Friday, however, it wouldn’t admit him until the following Monday. In the meantime, Derek was told he must spend the entire weekend sober.

“I was on the phone with him for hours trying to keep him distracted,” Kris said. “He did it.”

For the next 30 days, a determined Derek got help to live a clean, sober life. He kept a journal to pour his emotions into. The journal, Kris said, is full of anger – mostly with himself.

“It’s torture to read,” Kris said. “It rips your heart out.”

**A new beginning**

The next three years had more ups than downs for the Lessard family. Kris and Tim felt their quirky, fun-loving son had returned.

“He was doing so good,” Tim said. “He finally got a job and moved to a better apartment. Things were going really good.”

Kris chimed in there were times he would slip, which she knew because they wouldn’t hear from him for awhile.

“We never believed he was totally clean,” she said. “But he really was doing so much better.”

In April of 2013, Kris retired, after some hesitation, from her position with CBP and that July, she rented a home in Alexandria, Va., to be closer to her boys. Don had moved to the D.C. area earlier that year to pursue his education.

“We had so much fun,” Kris said of the weekend afternoons she and her sons would spend laughing together at a barbecue or exploring a new museum. The three of them spent almost every weekend together, except for one in August.

“I got a hold of Derek late one Sunday afternoon asking if he still wanted to get together,” Kris said, as the smile of good memories began to fade from her face. “He said it was getting too late and we should put it off. I’m so sorry I didn’t insist we get together. I think he died that night.”

**Regret and hope**

Kris and Tim believe Derek’s addiction started in high school with alcohol and marijuana. Looking back, Kris said she didn’t

know he would escalate to using heroin.

“We found out he had only been using heroin for about six months before he died,” she said.

The couple lives with a lot of good memories of their son, but they share regrets, too.

“I wish I would have acted a little quicker,” Kris said about getting Derek help. “(Addiction) may start with something like alcohol or marijuana, but you never know when someone will progress.”

As a mother, Kris urges parents to be aware of potential warning signs and reach out to their children about the dangers of drugs and overdose.

“I should have talked to Derek more,” she said. “But it was hard. He had a lot of trouble communicating and acknowledging his feelings – he could write them down, but he couldn’t talk about it. He used drugs as an escape.”

In addition, Kris explained she would have better conveyed to Derek she and Tim would have done anything and everything to help him.

“As parents, we should have known what resources are out there,” she said. “If kids come to adults they trust, please, be a resource for them. Don’t judge them.”

**Moving forward**

The couple are hopeful their story will encourage other families struggling with a drug addiction to seek help before it’s too late.

“We need to congratulate and celebrate people who are in recovery because it is such an accomplishment,” Kris said. “They are fighting the good fight and they are winning. It gives the rest of us hope.”

As she looks around the home where her son grew up, Kris said she is overcome with sadness he will never walk the halls there again.

“I have this feeling with every day that goes by, he gets further and further away,” she said, tears again welling in her eyes. “We don’t know yet how to live the rest of our lives without Derek. What we do know is the love and support from families and friends means more than they know. We just don’t want Derek to be forgotten.”

# EMERGENCY

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“A perfect example would be the Fourth of July coming up,” Jespersen said. “One o’clock there’s a parade, but there’s severe weather moving in. We could send this out to every cell phone in the community.”

Currently, the system is able to contact people with listed telephone numbers, Jespersen said. But for the system to work best, they need people to register their cell phone numbers online, through a link on the city and county websites. The registration process takes less than five minutes, he said, and allows people to specify if they want to receive all, or only some of the notifications.

“I do think people are going to register, and I think it’s going to be a very nice system for them once they do,” Jensen said.

Those who register will also be able to identify if they have any homebound people living with them, which will help save time in case of an evacuation, Jespersen said. If they know certain homes have people



who need assistance in an evacuation, they can get to those homes first to make sure no one is left behind, he said.

“In an emergency situation that saves critical time, because we know we don’t have to go to this person’s address but we do have to go to this one,” Jespersen said.

For people who may be concerned about their cell phone number or email address getting out or sold to a telemarketing company, Jespersen said the list is secured through the company that runs the service, Everbridge.

For older citizens who may not have a computer

or be computer literate, Jensen said they’ll set up three or four computers at the fire station so people can get assistance registering their phone numbers. Citizens should also lend a hand to make sure their older relatives get their phone numbers registered, he said.

“Help their parents or friends that don’t have computers, help them get set up,” Jespersen said.

Jespersen said access to the system is limited, with his dispatchers, administrative assistant, and himself able to send out messages. RLMC will only be able to reach its employees, and Jensen said his dispatchers will mainly use the system as a backup to contact his personnel in case of an emergency.

“It happened a few years ago when we had a lightning strike and knocked out the system,” Jensen said. “Now we’re going to have a backup system where we can send it out on smartphones.”

Jespersen said he’ll be able to reach the entire county with they system, but is also able to focus on a specific area he wants to notify. If there’s an issue in International Falls, he may just limit the message to the city and not send it out to residents in Littlefork or other areas it may not affect.

“Let’s say we have a gas outage in the community, or something like that,” Jensen said. “We can send that alert out to the area of people that are affected by that.”


People who register their cell phone number can specify what kinds of messages they want to receive, Jespersen said. If they don’t want to receive notifications about weather issues, they can note that. Anyone

who registers their information won’t get barraged with notifications, either.

“It’s not going to be abused,” Jensen said. “We’re not going to use it to just send out bogus calls,

this is emergency stuff.”

The city of International Falls’ website is [www.ci.international-falls.mn.us](http://www.ci.international-falls.mn.us). The Koochiching County website is [www.co.koochiching.mn.us](http://www.co.koochiching.mn.us).



*The Lord has taken you from us, but never from our hearts, for part of us went with you, you'll never be alone. You carried a smile that lifted up our spirits, you're the one we forever hold the dearest!*

*Loving You Always*  
*Mom, Sister Holly, Brother Jess, Grandma Carol & Ron Lahman and all your family & friends*

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