

# TURNING TRAGEDY INTO TESTAMENT

Sherry Ajluni paves the way for parents

[ WRITTEN BY CARL DANBURY ]

Curling up on a comfortable sofa on her screened-in porch, cell phone muted, a sobbing mother struggles with incredibly dark thoughts that seep into her already besieged mind; her foundation shaken to its core by the 2010 suicide of her 21-year-old addicted son Brandon.

Such debilitating, self-absorbed behavior was antithetical for Sherry Ajluni, a faithful, passionate, people-pleasing and driven real estate professional. But the plentitude of us whose lives have been exposed to addiction (regardless of what kind) understand that the crippling, often deadly, effects of addiction can often be as damaging to those who lend their love, support, care and concern as it is to the addicts themselves.

#### Brandon's Battles

Brandon was an amiable, thrill-seeking athlete, a good-natured and playful guy, but one who struggled with addiction from high school into his college years,

altering some of those lovable traits. He had undergone extensive treatment, received tough love from his parents, but relapses were frequent. While he was attending Darton State College in Albany, Ajluni and her husband Rick were notified that Brandon was missing. Three days later, police discovered his body.

After the funeral, months of constant tears, blaming herself and asking God to take her too, advice from her therapist helped snap Ajluni out of her unending grief.

"She told me that wanting to die was sending a message to my other children, to Rick and the rest of my family that they weren't important," Ajluni said. "That changed my perspective quickly."

And it helped her embark on a passionate journey to help others, so that Brandon's death could be used as a catalyst for drug awareness and helping others affected by addiction.

"Brandon and I had discussed his desire to create a



*Four out of five kids will try drugs or alcohol before they graduate high school.*

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center in Forsyth County for those dealing with addiction. He wanted to help others too,” Ajluni offered.

First, she enacted a contest for DECA (Distributive Education Clubs of America) marketing students at South Forsyth High School in the spring of 2012, and shared Brandon’s story to entice those students to develop a drug awareness and prevention campaign for their peers. The winners of the contest developed their “Give Me One Good Reason” campaign, which Ajluni applauded.

“Should I use drugs and screw up the rest of my life?” was the premise,” Ajluni said. The idea for the program was for teens to help other teens. “Teens that want to stay sober can have a much more profound effect on their fellow students,” she said.

### **A Community Called to Action**

Nationwide, the statistics of addiction are alarming. Overdose is now the leading cause of injury death in the country among young people, more than those who die in car accidents, according to the Center for Disease Control. In addition, 90 percent of all people in treatment or active adult addiction began using drugs between the ages of 12-18, according to the Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, and four out of five kids will try drugs or alcohol before they graduate high school, according to a National Institute of Drug Abuse study, “Monitoring the Future.”

“Addiction can happen to anyone today,” Ajluni

said. “Parents are caught off guard because our kids look so normal to us. It’s such a preventable thing and I don’t want to see others go through what we did,” Ajluni added.

Ajluni and her husband also contribute their time and energies to “Pathways 2 Life,” which is a drug prevention program for high school students. Meetings are organized by Ryan Stringfield and Kim Michell, and are held Monday evenings at The Ed Isakson Alpharetta Family YMCA.

While some schools have been slow to instill full-fledged drug education programs, Ajluni’s quest for a more complete and proactive fight against addiction received a significant boost from Cindy Jones Mills, District 4 commissioner of Forsyth County, and Sheriff Duane Piper. They were instrumental in establishing The Forsyth County Drug Awareness Council (FCDAC), with a stated mission to educate, advocate and empower the community to prevent substance abuse in the county. The county orchestrated two drug summits to assist in the education process. Ajluni tearfully told Brandon’s story to the more than 500 people that attended the first summit.

In addition, the couple helped establish The Parent Recovery Network, an anonymous support group for parents of kids struggling with substance abuse. The group meets Thursday nights at 7 p.m. at Creekside Church in Cumming. “That’s what I feel God wants us to do, to help other parents get help faster and provide support for each other,” she said.

For those who are reluctant to attend, Ajluni’s first-hand experience yields dividends.

“The two most difficult, yet most essential things for parents to get past initially are the shame or guilt they feel, and the ultimate realization that they have absolutely no control over their child’s addiction. The parents can’t fix the problem for their child — the addict has to want to fix it themselves,” Ajluni stated.

One of the key ingredients of the support group is for parents to understand that addiction, like any disease, requires both treatment and concern.

“That is one of the most important things for parents to learn, and for us as a group to educate others upon, that addiction is a disease. Realizing that their child has a disease is helpful because they tend to treat



them differently, have less anger toward them and are more willing to assist the addict in getting the help they need,” Ajluni related.

Ajluni also encourages parents and family members to help spread awareness by sharing stories through public speaking, blogs and social media. One example Ajluni cited is the Acworth-based blog, “No Heroin in Heaven.” In memory of Elizabeth Turner who lost the battle with her addiction in February of 2013, the site details not only her heartbreaking story, but also those of many other young adults, including hopeful stories of recovery and links to resources to help others.

### Revival through Real Estate

When she’s not helping those affected by drug abuse, Ajluni is providing support in another area: to homeowners and potential homeowners. She made the decision to exit the corporate world after 10 years in marketing and advertising, which included international travel for weeks at a time. The mother of two and stepmom to her husband’s three children, Ajluni missed spending time with family and fulfillment was difficult to attain.

A friend suggested she try real estate and Ajluni took a leap of faith. “I didn’t even know if I was going to like it,” she said. “But I’ve always believed that God will provide if I’m trying to do the right thing.”

She originally thought it would be a part-time occupation, but when her untameable passion kicked in, she knew it would become a career. She and Maria Livingston, a neighbor and former school teacher, founded Sherry & Maria Team, a Keller Williams Realty Consultants real estate agency with six agents covering 12 metro Atlanta communities. In 2013, Sherry & Maria Team ranked as one of Keller Williams’ top teams with \$38 million in transactional sales. This year, they have set a goal of \$50 million.

Ajluni enjoys the one-on-one time she spends with clients and is committed to providing them honest, sound advice. The growth of Sherry & Maria Team is a testament that clients appreciate the personal approach, as more than 70 percent of their client base comes through referrals.

Livingston and Ajluni have shared more than just a business relationship for the past seven years. They have lived in the same neighborhood for six years, their husbands play on the same ALTA team and the two

couples are regular trivia night players.

“We met at the Keller Williams office and had an immediate connection,” Livingston said. “We became accountability partners. We both had our separate businesses, but began having weekly meetings on Monday mornings, and we still do to this day, to support each other’s efforts. Then, we began putting our clients together and decided to go into business together. Our friendship blossomed from there.”

Last year, Livingston was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer, and it was Ajluni who was instrumental in helping her maintain a positive outlook as she faced numerous surgical procedures and long periods of recovery.

“We are so intertwined, both as business partners and friends. She was the first person I called once I received the biopsy results. I don’t remember exactly what she said, but she calmed me down and told me ‘we’re going to be OK,’” Livingston said. “She went to chemotherapy with me and was there for me through the entire process. I just didn’t know how the chemo was going to affect me, and I didn’t know how it was going to affect the business. Sherry did what she had to do to make it work.” Of course, Livingston did the same for Ajluni four years ago.

“I have discussed the incredible relationship we have with other people and explain that while it was founded upon both of us wanting to help each other in business, it definitely has carried over into our personal lives,” Livingston offered.

“It’s funny, even though we have a lot of fun together socially, our conversations seem to circle back to real estate,” Livingston laughed. “We’re always working!”

In Ajluni’s case, her passion to please others comes with driven sincerity, whether for her vocation or her avocation.

“She is such a strong person,” Livingston said. “She has endured such adversity and I just really admire her for her willingness to help others instead of keeping it to herself. To make such a positive statement about drug awareness in Forsyth County and beyond, out of a horrible tragedy, truly speaks to her character.” **PN**

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[forsythcountydrugawarenesscouncil.org](http://forsythcountydrugawarenesscouncil.org)

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