

Inspiring Stories of People Who  
Fight Against Overwhelming Odds

I Am



Storm

JANICE DEAN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
*MOSTLY SUNNY*

# I Am the Storm

Inspiring Stories of People Who Fight  
Against Overwhelming Odds

**JANICE DEAN**



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# Dedication

For those who continue to fight.  
Never give up.

# Epigraph

You may have to fight a battle more than once to win it.

—*Margaret Thatcher*

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## Introduction

For almost twenty years, viewers have seen me as the “mostly sunny” meteorologist on television. (I even wrote a book about it!) But like the weather I forecast, life isn’t always clear skies. The storms roll in, sometimes without any warning. And it’s what you choose to do with those moments that can change the outcome. Sometimes the roughest conditions teach you the hardest lessons, but it can also prepare you for the future and help build a stronger foundation to stand on.

I’ve had plenty of bad weather that threatened to destroy me. A home invasion in my early thirties made me reevaluate where I was living, and helped me decide to move back home to heal. It forced me to look at where I was headed and start over to make better choices. A few years later, a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis threatened to sidetrack my career and hopes for a family of my own. After a few months of feeling sorry for myself, I surrounded myself with encouraging people (and a good therapist) who told me not to let a chronic illness get in the way of my dreams. Despite a few people advising me to keep my MS a secret, I decided it was more important to be honest and share my illness to help others.

Being bullied in school as a kid and having a couple of abusive bosses at work also helped shape the person I am today. Sometimes the best course of action is to walk away from the abuse, which I did in 2003 when I worked for the notorious shock jock broadcaster Don Imus. Not long after I moved to New York for what should have been the best job of my life, I had to look for something else. And that brought me to Fox News, where I’ve worked for almost two decades.

In 2016, I was one of the women who came forward about being sexually harassed by Fox News CEO (now deceased) Roger Ailes. The harassment happened early on in my career, and I was able to navigate the



situation while still having an exciting, productive job. I just figured the boss was a lonely guy looking for an affair. I brushed off his suggestions and provocative questions and reminded him I was in a relationship. This wasn't the first time I'd had to deal with this kind of behavior, and it's not exclusive to powerful CEOs in broadcasting. Back then, there wasn't much I could do about it. Most companies were set up to protect those in power.

When Gretchen Carlson filed her lawsuit against Roger after being let go from Fox, many of us had to decide if it was worth coming forward to tell our stories during an investigation. My friend Megyn Kelly's name was leaked in the press for confessing that she too was harassed and propositioned by Ailes, and that's when we found the courage to share our own experiences.

None of us thought Roger would be fired, and we would be punished. But, on behalf of other possible victims, a silent army of us risked our jobs and livelihoods to tell our embarrassing, dark stories to a roomful of lawyers. The action was swift. Gretchen won her lawsuit and Roger was let go.

It's important to point out that all of this happened before the #MeToo movement. Sometimes I wonder if maybe my small part helped pave the way for the brave women who came forward about former New York governor Andrew Cuomo's alleged sexual harassment.

I've been asked which was harder: going against one of the most powerful CEOs in broadcasting or a dynasty politician? I will say this: Had I not had the challenge of risking my career to tell the truth about a very powerful boss, I don't think I would have had the courage to stand up to a Cuomo.

It began in the spring of 2020, when my husband lost both of his parents. They contracted the coronavirus in separate care facilities within two weeks of each other. It changed our lives forever, and gave me a new purpose: to find out if their deaths could have been prevented.

Michael and Dolores Newman were both born in New York City. Fondly known to family and friends as "Mickey and Dee," they lived in a four-story walk-up in Flatbush, Brooklyn, for more than fifty years. They would have celebrated their diamond anniversary, marking sixty years of marriage, had their lives not been suddenly cut short.

Sean's parents were declining in health and were having trouble getting in and out of their apartment. For many years we urged them to find a place

that had better access, but we could never convince them. There were aides who would visit, but Mickey was suffering from dementia and Dee's health was making it tough to take care of him. It was time to find a place that could help look after both of them. Sean and his sister Donna drove around with Dee looking at assisted living residences, and found one close to us that would take both her and Mickey, but we had to get Mickey in better shape. He was in a nursing home/rehab for various ailments, and his dementia was getting worse. We hadn't even packed up their Brooklyn apartment when COVID crashed into our lives. The Newmans had never been apart for more than a couple of days in their fifty-nine-year marriage, but they ended up both dying alone.

Mickey's death was in late March. We were all in quarantine, and prohibited from visiting him. It was hard to get regular updates on his health. On a Saturday morning, we got a call saying that he wasn't feeling well, and was running a fever. Three hours later he was dead. We didn't find out he died from COVID until we saw his death certificate.

Sean had to tell his mom over the phone that her husband had died. It was the hardest thing he's ever had to do. Two weeks later, Dee got sick and was transported to the hospital, where she was diagnosed with COVID and died a few days later.

At first, we didn't blame anyone for their deaths. We knew the virus was particularly dangerous for the elderly, but we were advised to have them stay put. We later found out there was no proper personal protective equipment (PPE) or ways to test incoming patients. More important, our family was never informed of the March 25 executive order that the governor and the New York State Department of Health were enforcing. More than nine thousand COVID-positive patients would be put back into nursing homes instead of the other facilities that the federal government had provided. I remember that a few days before Mickey died, an aide told us he was being moved to another floor to make room for incoming residents. At that moment we didn't think anything of it, but now I believe it was to bring in infected patients.

When I finally found out about the governor's deadly mandate, it was too late. Sean's parents were gone. We were unable to have wakes or funerals for them. Many bodies were stored in refrigerated trucks because there was no room for them at the morgues. My sister's childhood friend

Frankie, who owns a funeral home, offered to keep them together until we could bury them several weeks later.

As we were mourning their loss, I was trying to find out more information on what was happening inside nursing homes. Why were we told to stay at home and as far away from the virus as possible while the most vulnerable were like sitting ducks with the deadly coronavirus flooding their residences? Some local reporters were starting to ask questions, but Cuomo seemed to be getting a pass. And when he was asked to comment, he deflected the blame.

Meanwhile, the New York governor's star was on the rise. The media was in love with this "New York Tough" talking governor. His daily briefings were televised on national TV and he was embarrassingly fawned over during interviews on all the major news networks.

Cuomo's brother, Chris, the prime-time anchor on CNN, was frequently hosting him on his program despite ethical concerns. Many of the segments were peppered with jokes and comments about Andrew's love life.

The insensitivity of it was infuriating, especially for those of us who lost loved ones and were trying to find answers for their deaths.

I do remember the day my grief turned to rage. I saw the Cuomo brothers laughing on CNN with their giant cotton swab props. They were joking about Andrew getting a COVID test and how big his nostrils were. I couldn't believe this comedy routine was happening; these guys were making fun of the fact that they had access to COVID tests—something most people couldn't get, including nursing homes.

I've always said that, had Andrew Cuomo admitted his mistakes early on, apologized, and told us he would spend the rest of his career making sure this never happened again, I would've forgiven him. Instead he celebrated himself, blamed others, and went to great lengths to cover up his egregious errors.

I wrote an opinion piece May 22, 2020, about my in-laws' tragic deaths and went on Tucker Carlson's show on Fox News to share our family's story. With a lump in my throat and a broken heart, I was no longer the meteorologist warning of incoming weather systems. We were grieving relatives who wanted answers.

As New York's death toll was dramatically rising, Cuomo continued his national media tour, never being asked the nursing home questions I so desperately wanted the answers to.

In August 2020, King Cuomo announced his next crowning achievement: a memoir he somehow found the time to write in the middle of a pandemic. While thousands of families were faced with the fact that they would never see their loved ones again, he was auctioning off a \$5.1 million book to the highest bidder.

The book deal was shocking enough, but then, not long after that, Hollywood decided to give him an Emmy Award for his daily COVID briefings.

Andrew Cuomo was a ratings hit while real lives and livelihoods in New York were being crushed to death.

I kept speaking out as much as I could on local New York television and radio stations. It was tough getting liberal media outlets to cover my story, and when they did, they would focus on where I worked instead of the incredible tragedy that happened to my family. Social media became a very important weapon for me, where I could tweet news articles and call out reporters and members of Cuomo's administration about what was happening in New York. I traveled thousands of miles throughout the state to attend rallies with other grieving families and a handful of politicians who were brave enough to go against his vindictive, brutal political machine.

A friend who knew the Cuomo family well warned me early on to "watch my back!" Those who tried to cross him would feel the wrath of his team, who were all well versed in attacking, smearing, and making phone calls at midnight screaming at their targets. I was feeling the pressure.

In December 2020 I almost gave up the fight. Exhausted and feeling the weight of trying to work, raise a family, and be an advocate was taking its toll. Sean was reminding me it might be time to take a break. Was this really worth it? One of the biggest triggers for MS is stress, and at this point, I was a ticking time bomb for a relapse. I also knew how hard it was for my family to watch their mom (and wife) being consumed by something that might have seemed like madness.

Just as I was about to step away from the Twitter keyboard and put away my rally signs, New York attorney general Letitia James released a report in January 2021 on the nursing home tragedy. The headline was that Andrew Cuomo's administration "severely" undercounted virus deaths. Then, in a stunning conversation leaked to the *New York Post*, Cuomo's top aide, Melissa DeRosa, admitted that they were purposely hiding the nursing

home data so the federal government wouldn't find out and use it against them politically.

The FBI and federal prosecutors in Brooklyn announced they were investigating Cuomo's coronavirus task force with a focus on his administration's handling of nursing homes early in the pandemic. The stories of bullying and abuse were suddenly seeing the light of day in newspapers, on social media, and even on the Cuomo-friendly cable channels.

This was also around the time when a woman named Lindsey Boylan decided to tweet about her worst job ever: working for Andrew Cuomo.

After months of favorable press and puff piece interviews, the tide was turning against the three-term governor from a New York dynasty.

Eleven women would come forward with stories of sexual harassment and assault, and there were more investigations being announced about the then governor's abuse of power. The tangled web of high-powered Cuomo connections was also about to unravel.

In August 2021, Andrew Cuomo resigned in disgrace, along with the key members of his administration. In September, his health commissioner, Howard Zucker, submitted his resignation, following bipartisan pressure criticizing his role in the state's COVID-19 pandemic response.

Then in December, Chris Cuomo was fired from CNN for helping advise his brother during the sexual harassment investigations, and for his own alleged #MeToo issues. In February 2022, Jeff Zucker, the president of CNN, and his longtime girlfriend, Allison Gollust, a top CNN executive (and former communications director for Andrew Cuomo), were forced to resign after an investigation showed they were also advising the former governor during the pandemic and using CNN to boost his profile. Ms. Gollust would feed questions to producers and hosts while the governor was being interviewed.

There was a media machine built to prop this man up and try to silence people who were trying to speak out. I was one of them.

Had you told me that I would be spending over two years of my life trying to shine a light on a tragedy that happened to more than fifteen thousand elderly, thanks in part to the reckless leadership from one of the most powerful politicians in New York history, I would've said you were confusing me with someone else. There's no doubt this fight brought out a fire inside me I haven't quite felt before.

While all of this was happening, I found others who were doing the same thing: finding their voice to speak up about issues that were affecting their own families. A lot of this passion was taking place during the pandemic when people were at home, experiencing life under quarantine, not being able to go to work, see their kids in schools, travel, or say good-bye to loved ones before they died. That kind of dynamic made us angry about what was happening in the world, and begged the question: How can we change things for the better?

I also found myself wondering: What fuels an individual's passion to go up against a much stronger opponent? That kind of storm was brewing inside myself, and I wanted to talk to others who had the same powerful perseverance despite the odds against them.

I remembered back to the biblical book of Samuel we learned about as young kids in Sunday school: the young man named David, who, with only a sling and a pouch full of stones, stepped forward to face the mightier Goliath. The Philistine champion's smaller, weaker opponent was told he didn't have a chance in the battle. And just when it looked like David might be finished, he launched one of his rocks toward a vulnerable spot on Goliath's head that was unprotected by armor. It knocked him out, and miraculously, David was able to end the monster for good.

What I've found out is that there's a David in all of us. From soldiers fighting wars, parents who stand up for their kids, a fireman who risked his life to make sure others would have health care, and a horse trainer who beat the odds to keep doing what he loved to a young woman who delivered a forecast that changed the world.

The common threads through all of these moments are resilience, hope, and perseverance. The question is, how long are you willing to fight for the truth, and if no one else rises to the challenge, do you stand alone?

It's that moment when fate whispers to the warrior and says,  
"You cannot withstand the storm,"  
And the warrior whispers back,  
"I am the storm."

## Prologue

**D**id you know that one of the most important weather forecasts in history originated from one of the most remote lighthouses in the Atlantic? The crucial information about the atmospheric conditions gave two days' warning of a storm that was brewing 500 miles away, and helped decide whether a precisely planned invasion two years in the making would go ahead.

This true story has always fascinated me as a meteorologist, but when I found out that it was a young woman that relayed this historic information, that's when it became much more interesting.

Maureen Flavin grew up in the southern part of County Kerry, Ireland. She had just turned eighteen, had finished her secondary school exams, and was looking for work. She saw an opportunity as a post office assistant that was located in Blacksod, at a hard-to-get-to lighthouse in the southern end of the Mullet Peninsula. Her nearest relative, Uncle Edward, owned a pub next door and had no family of his own. He announced that he would leave his niece the pub if she wanted to stay there.

Maureen said she wasn't interested in owning a pub, and even dreamed about traveling to America since she had family that had immigrated to the Northeast. After taking two and a half days to travel to Blacksod (which nowadays would take just a few hours), Miss Flavin decided to accept the job as the new post office assistant.

Maureen enjoyed the work but didn't realize how involved it would be. A big part of her duties involved documenting the weather.

According to the *Irish Independent*, "Blacksod was the first land-based observation station in Europe where weather readings could be professionally taken on the prevailing European Atlantic westerly weather

systems.” During World War II, the Republic of Ireland was neutral. But it did allow the sharing of weather information with Great Britain.

Maureen spent quite a bit of her time writing down the atmospheric conditions. She really didn’t understand what for, but she was diligent about her work and getting it right. Things started to get a bit more hectic as she was being requested to send more data every hour.

It was on her twenty-first birthday, on June 3, 1944, at 1:00 a.m., that Maureen was on duty documenting the information. One crucial instrument that has been used to study weather since the 1600s is a barometer. It measures the atmospheric pressure, which gives us clues about the conditions we’re going to experience. A drop in air pressure usually means there are clouds, rain, and/or windy conditions approaching. Alternatively, if the barometric pressure rises, that means the atmosphere is pushing away the unsettled weather and bringing in a drier, more stable air mass.

On that day, Maureen’s research was showing that the air pressure was dropping rapidly. That meant there was something out there in the Atlantic, a nasty storm that would hit the Irish coast, move over the United Kingdom, then down over the channel into Normandy, France. Miss Flavin compiled the report and then sent it to Dublin. That information was then forwarded to Dunstable, England, where the meteorological headquarters were stationed. Captain James Martin Stagg was the chief meteorologist for US General Dwight D. Eisenhower and was helping plan the Allied invasion. Stagg saw Maureen’s hourly updates and decided to bypass the Dublin office for information. He then had someone call the Blacksod post office directly.

In a recorded interview in 2014, Maureen recalled that crucial phone call:

“A lady with a distinct English accent requested me to Please Check! Please Repeat!”

Stagg and his staff saw what Maureen was sending them: a drop in the barometric pressure indicating a strong area of low pressure.

Maureen was getting nervous about all of these requests, so she called someone she knew who was more experienced: Ted Sweeney, the son of the woman who ran the post office (and the man she would marry a few years later). Maureen asked Ted to check her work. He said it looked correct, so she went ahead and sent the information to Dunstable. The Supreme



Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) in England was forwarded her weather reports, which were checked and double-checked.

When asked if her forecast was accurate, Maureen said it was.

Maureen said that when it came to the invasion, there were things they could put in place, but one thing they had no control over was the weather.

“They had it all worked out to the nearest detail, but our weather report put the first spoke in the wheel.”

The rest is history.

General Eisenhower decided to postpone D-Day by one day, so instead of going ahead on the fifth, Operation Overlord (the code name for the invasion) took place on the sixth of June. Ted and Maureen had no idea of the gravity of their reporting. If it weren't for their accurate prediction, Allied forces would have gone ahead on the fifth and the invasion would have been a disaster.

It wasn't until decades later that Maureen Flavin Sweeney realized how crucial her observations were.

“There were thousands of aircraft and they couldn't tolerate low cloud. We're delighted we put them on the right road. We eventually had the final say!”

Although Maureen didn't know how important her reports were, she took her work very seriously and always wanted to do a good job.

The trajectory of history would be very different if not for Maureen Sweeney's hard work determination, and the precise weather report she delivered.

Maureen Sweeney will turn one hundred this year on June 3, 2023, just a few days before the seventy-ninth anniversary of the D-Day invasion. She lives in Belmullet, County Mayo, Ireland, not far from the lighthouse where she used to work.

Her story inspired me to write *I Am the Storm*, and when I interviewed her son Vincent, I came to the conclusion that one person really can change the world. It doesn't happen overnight, and sometimes it takes a lifetime for the history to be written.

And just as I was learning more about the Sweeney family, Vincent revealed that they knew something about mine.

You could say Mother Nature had something to do with it, but then you'll have to read on to find out why. . . .

# 1

## “I Don’t Want Anybody to Be One Day Too Late”

### The Mother vs. the Opioid Crisis

While I was writing this book, several people recommended I watch the series *Dopesick* on Hulu about the opioid crisis in America. It paid particular attention to the prescription pain medication OxyContin, which was developed and patented in 1996.

Living in New York, I had followed the story through news reports about the wealthy Sackler family settling thousands of opioid-related lawsuits, but the TV program revealed how their company, Purdue Pharma, knowingly took advantage of the doctors who treat pain and the patients who suffer. The deaths and damage this has inflicted on tens of thousands of families is unforgivable.

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, addiction is a “chronic, relapsing disorder characterized by compulsive drug seeking, continued use despite harmful consequences, and long-lasting changes in the brain. It is considered both a complex brain disorder and a mental illness. Addiction is the most severe form of a full spectrum of substance use disorders, and is a medical illness caused by repeated misuse of a substance or substances.”

More than 100,000 people die from drug overdoses a year in the United States, with opioids factoring in 7 out of 10 of their deaths. In 2022, overdose deaths were up by 30 percent, and unfortunately, going through a pandemic made things worse for those living with this Goliath known as addiction.

Shelly Elkington of Montevideo, Minnesota, believes that her daughter Casey’s struggle with opioid addiction led to her suicide in 2015. After Casey’s death, Shelly wanted to help other families living the same

nightmare they went through. This fight has not been easy for her or her own family, but she keeps going to try to prevent this from happening to others.

I begin our conversation by asking Shelly to tell me about her daughter. She says it's her favorite place to start.

“You know, Casey was just like anybody's daughter. She was fun and energetic, and she could be difficult as a teenager. We had lots of great times together. She was athletic, and one of the most determined people I've yet to meet in my life. We had a great friendship. She was very much about family, and I know I was really important to her. She was strong-willed, but she had so much energy about her. And then she got sick.”

Casey was diagnosed with Crohn's disease in her first year of college. Crohn's is a type of inflammatory bowel disease that causes swelling of the digestive tract. That inflammation can bring many symptoms, including fatigue, weight loss, and extreme, debilitating pain.

It was hardest for Casey during her first year in college. She watched her friends go out and do all these fun things, while she had to deal with this frightening, long-term illness. At the beginning, Casey was doing well on her own, but then having to endure multiple surgeries was an incredibly tough journey that changed Shelly's daughter significantly.

The medication began when she was recovering from the surgeries and living with Crohn's. Every time she ate, she was in pain.

“For so long you're trying to figure out what's wrong, so the treatment for that probably wasn't wrong. And I'm very cautious about this part of the story because I don't place blame on her doctor, necessarily. He was treating her for pain, which was appropriate at the time.”

Shelly says that back then, the doctors were sold a bad bill of goods and didn't really know how addictive these drugs are. After Casey went in for a big surgery, she had already been on high dosages of opioids.

“Treating the pain from that was almost impossible, so it began a couple of years before her death. It was in 2013 when she started getting the regular prescriptions.”

The pain meds were oxycodone. (Oxycodone/OxyContin have the same active narcotic ingredient. The difference is in how the tablet releases the medication. OxyContin tablets release oxycodone continuously throughout the day; oxycodone is immediate.)

Casey was also prescribed fentanyl patches (used to relieve severe pain in people who are expected to need medication around the clock for a long time). Shelly says that as a parent, all you want to do is make your child feel better, and you don't care what it takes. Back then, Casey was trying to be independent, living in Fargo, North Dakota, and going to college. She came home for a while after the surgery, and did well. Eventually, Casey wanted to go back to school, and was driven to try to do that. But living with a debilitating illness was wearing her down.

“She weighed eighty-five pounds. She was so tiny taking all these meds, and it dawns on you that something's wrong. The drugs are now becoming a little bit different than they're intended to be.”

Shelly says that at one point Casey was in the hospital and the doctors were giving her the drugs through an intravenous line. It wasn't working. Her doctors were struggling because they realized they couldn't give this tiny girl any more medication. It was becoming too dangerous.

“She's crying and having procedures done with no pain relief, and I'm crying because I just don't want her to hurt anymore. And I think that was the time I knew we were in trouble. Really big trouble.”

When Casey was discharged from the hospital, Shelly remembers one of the doctors saying they needed to talk: The opioids had created something different. Casey had built up a tolerance and was now dependent on them.

“The last thing she wanted was for anybody to take them away from her.”

I ask Shelly where she gets her strength to do this. How long after Casey's death did she realize that she wanted to use this tragic situation to be a force for good? She says her daughter died in August 2015, and a few months later, in December, she saw something about an opioid issue happening in her state and she submitted a comment. The Minneapolis *Star Tribune* called her because they had read what she wrote and wanted to do a story.

“And that was kind of my first time I'd ever been asked about any of it. I think that's what moves you—from that immense grief sitting alone in your house, to all of a sudden a couple of years later, being at the State of the Union because you've been an advocate. It's not sadness and it's not anger. It's this combination of trying to prevent other people from having to go through what you're going through.”

Shelly recalls one of the last times she talked to her daughter. It was after her son Zack had called to say he thought Casey was in trouble. He was scared for her and knew she needed help. Shelly reached out and announced they were going to do something.

“And she’s crying, and she says, ‘It’s not my fault, Momma.’ And I’ll never forget that because what that told me was she was afraid to ask for help. How embarrassed, how humiliated and ashamed she must have felt. And I thought: How many other people must be going through life like Casey and how many parents like me are feeling helpless not knowing what to do? So honestly, that was it. That was the drive and then channeling grief into that work.”

Listening to Shelly tell this story brings tears to my eyes because I can relate to that feeling. I remember my sister-in-law, Donna, telling me that one of the last things her mom (my mother-in-law), Dee, said on the phone when she was sick with COVID in the hospital was that she was scared. It’s something you never forget, and it’s what fuels the desire to channel it into advocacy. You can let it eat you up and make you sad or depressed or angry. For me, I admit, it has become a bit of an obsession. I’m not sure if it’s healthy, but it has gotten me through several years of never giving up by wanting justice for my family.

Shelly says she’s been called a zealot, and had to look up the word.

“I was, like, I’m not sure that was a compliment, but I’ll take it.”

I asked Shelly to talk about her husband, Tim, through all of this, because my husband, Sean, seeing me on social media, doing hundreds of interviews, driving to rallies, often asks me, “When does it end?”

She says her spouse, Tim, is very low-key, and can relate to this.

“He never went with me to any of the events I was attending. Maybe once or twice when I asked him to. He’s not one to be in the spotlight, and never one to be interviewed. Tim just really supported me, and asked, ‘What do you need?’”

Afterward he would pack a lunch and make sure her car was safe, asking her to call him every time she arrived to her events.

“He was just a great husband and a great support person who I knew loved me and missed Casey terribly. And he knew I needed to do this. Looking back on it, I feel his grief.”

Tim was alone quite a bit while she was pounding doors and making noise. She says he was a quiet griever, but at the same time, a tremendous

support system.

“But the day he said to me, ‘Hey, are you sure you’re safe?’ That was something I’ll never forget.”

I tell her how much Tim sounds like Sean, and I’m weeping a bit. They both express their concern for us, and then they pack our lunch so we can go out and try to change the world.

Shelly admits that her way of grieving was channeled by driving to St. Paul two or three times a week, sometimes in a blizzard, to fight the fight while her husband was at home.

“I’ll never forget when I really started to get worried about what I was doing and who I was fighting against when the weather was bad and I shouldn’t have been out on the road. Tim looked at me and said, ‘Are you safe? And I don’t mean from the weather, but are you safe? Are you afraid of what might happen? Are you afraid of what they can do?’”

But Shelly says she couldn’t get into that headspace. Instead, she decided that no matter what, she had to try.

“I got in that car and I got louder than ever because that was our last push to get a bill passed that we had been working on and I thought, Not today. The fight doesn’t end today.”

But since then, Shelly has realized it’s one battle and then it’s on to the next one. It’s a cycle that entwines itself into a world she didn’t know a lot about: politics. That’s when she found herself getting more overwhelmed and then suddenly starting to cry when the grief rushes in.

However, she’s also found that in this world of being an advocate, there are many who stand by you.

“You find out quickly there are people helping you every step of the way. Not everybody can do what you do with your voice and the advocacy you’re doing. Not everybody could do what I do, but they’re still there, holding you up. And that’s really how you keep going. It’s the people that have gone through this same thing saying, I’m here for you. Let’s do it.”

When Shelly first started speaking out about what happened to Casey, she met a couple named Bill and Judy Rummler. They had lost their son Steve to a heroin overdose after years of a crippling addiction to opioids and created a foundation in his honor. That’s when Shelly began networking through the Rummler family, and they took her in and held her hand. She wasn’t alone anymore.

I ask Shelly if she ever feels like she's making a difference. There are times when I think I've helped bring awareness, but I'm not sure anything has really been fixed. Sometimes it seems endless. And when it comes to the David vs. Goliath aspect, there's no real decisive moment when this David wins the battle. It's a lifelong crusade that makes people around us ask, "When is it over?" And "When do we stop trying?"

But when there are victories, like legislation for emergency responders to carry naloxone (Narcan), there is the hope that people will be helped. Shelly pushes every day for that, but there are those moments of, When do we finally rest?

Shelly asks me if we can spend a minute on Casey's death because sometimes people get it wrong, and she wants to be very clear about what happened. There's a lot of assumption that Casey died of an overdose, but she didn't. Her cause of death was suicide, which leaves Shelly and her family in a tough place emotionally and in their advocacy because her death was also investigated as a homicide.

"The last three months of her life, she was out of touch with us, and for the most part, she was with heroin dealers. There's a lot of speculation around her death that we don't know. So sometimes in advocacy, I don't always feel like I fit in. But I want people to know that these deaths matter. People do take their own lives, and people have their lives taken by others as a result of this."

Shelly says that for Casey, as long as she was only using the meds that were prescribed to her, she felt she was doing nothing wrong. And that's how she convinced herself it was fine.

"She got very creative, but as long as they came through a pharmacy, it seemed normal. But Casey got to a point where it just wasn't okay anymore. She did end up with people that were using heroin, because I'm sure somebody told her at one point, it's cheaper and it's easier to get."

I ask Shelly how she dealt with this period when her daughter wasn't contacting her. Once your child becomes an adult, you have to let go, but how do you cope every day knowing she's sick and you just want to help?

"I remember my husband, Tim, saying, 'Have you heard from Casey?' I tried to find somebody who might know where she is. And the last time I did see her, Casey had to go to her doctor, and I thought, This is the day we are going to get her help."

Shelly picked up her daughter in St. Cloud, Minnesota, and drove her to the appointment. Casey didn't speak to her in the car, and her mom felt like she didn't know who this person was. They went into the doctor's office, got her meds, and filled them at the pharmacy. And then Shelly asked Casey to come home, because she needed help.

"And she said, 'I'll come later. I need to get my stuff. I need to get my car.' It was always something."

Shelly told Casey she would pay for a hotel room because during that time she was living in someone's garage.

"And I just remember her hugging me harder than she's ever hugged me, almost like she knew she wouldn't see me anymore."

The last three months before Casey died were very frightening. Shelly says they had gotten information from an ex-boyfriend that she was hanging around dangerous people, and was with someone who had been released from prison for domestic assault.

"There were a lot of people in her life that normally weren't. We never had these kinds of concerns about who Casey was with. It was just the last few months of her life, and that's what makes her death such a mystery to us and hard to navigate."

After Shelly had talked to Casey on the phone, she wanted to bring her to rehab. She had a doctor who had helped during one of her surgeries and now had a clinic specializing in suboxone, one of the medications used to treat opioid addiction, but back then it wasn't well-known.

"I didn't know what suboxone was. I had to google it. And I'm a nurse. I said, this seems like a really good option for you, Casey—something that could really help you. She agreed to do it. They had sent all the paperwork, and she had called me the day before. That appointment was on August twentieth of 2015. She died on August nineteenth."

Shelly says that's the hardest part for her, and when it comes to what drives her, it was that day.

"I don't want anybody to be one day too late."

Back in 2015, we didn't know the magnitude of opioids. Getting off of them is not as simple as quitting cold turkey. These powerful pain medications actually change your brain chemistry and once someone is addicted, you are dealing with a different person. Shelly says we have so much more work to do when it comes to awareness, resources, and building more clinics. In their community of Montevideo, there is now a suboxone



team of doctors that you can call, and they will get an induction started. There wasn't that avenue back when Casey needed it.

Still, the success rate of getting off the drugs is not great. It's about 20 percent.

"So what other systems do we need to be looking at to make this better for people? It's such a cost on our society, and not just the horrific loss of losing your beautiful daughter. That's the ultimate price, but the literal cost. The taxpayer cost."

Shelly says just getting awareness of opioids into the education system has been a Goliath battle. The pushback from schools is alarming in some communities.

"I have a great friend who does this work where she's going into schools and educating kids. You wouldn't believe the pushback she gets. They don't want her to come in, and that was before the pandemic. Kids are slipping through the cracks."

It's in every city and every town in America. I live in a close-knit community on Long Island filled with hardworking, middle-class families (many Irish Catholic and Italian families with both parents still married), good schools, and wonderful friends. I know several people in my community who have been touched by opioid addiction and death. It's heartbreaking. And unfortunately, there is a stigma attached to this that makes it even worse trying to raise awareness. No one in our society is immune from this crisis.

"This is why Casey didn't ask for help. She saw people who were addicts, and that was somebody else. Because society told her it was never going to be her. So then when something's wrong, imagine how hard it was for her to admit it. That's tough stuff."

I ask how we start talking to our children about this. My boys are eleven and thirteen. I've taken them both aside and said, We know you're good boys. We like your friends, but you still always need to come to us if you're in trouble. You have to keep us in the loop even if you're scared to talk to us. It only takes someone giving you half a pill that could end your life. You have no idea what's in that pill, which could be laced with fentanyl, a synthetic opioid eighty to one hundred times stronger than morphine. Am I being too harsh by scaring them? How do you preemptively help them with a potential situation?