



# Shelly Sanders

## Died Age 19

### Heroin

What image pops into your mind when you hear about a 19 year-old girl found dead in her college dorm bed from a heroin overdose? Would it be a child like our Shelly, described by her teachers as a teacher's dream a complete package? In high school and church she was involved in everything! She was popular with her peers and was elected class secretary. Shelly was academically gifted and was chosen to attend a residential public elite school for students gifted in science and math.

So, one must ask what went wrong with this child brimming of promise? Central themes run through Shelly's story that we discovered in retrospect: early innocent experimentation with marijuana at age 14, increase use of marijuana while at the residential school with less adult supervision, experimentation with other drugs, peer code of silence, etc.

However, Shelly's drug use was intertwined with another disorder that went undiagnosed by nine professionals until two months before her death. Bipolar in adolescents can have addiction rates as high as 50-70%. Now we understand that no matter how much drug intervention she received she faced an 85% chance of relapse without treatment for her bipolar. There is a great chasm between Psychiatry and Drug Counselors. This gap must be

closed to prevent children from slipping through this crack to their death. A simple bipolar family history screening could have prevented this horrible addiction to opiates. Shortly before Shelly's death she said to me," Mom, I have changed my mind about being a physician. I want to help a lot of people who struggle with addiction and bipolar. I have a mind for molecular biology and I believe the answers lie within the genome."

We hope by Shedding Light on Shelly's Little Secret, that she can accomplish her dream of helping a lot of people even in her death. Shelly was doubly embarrassed by her conditions. She did not want people to know that she had a drug problem much less a mental illness. She kept her secret from many of her friends, family, teachers and co-workers.

She was able to maintain her sobriety for approximately one year while a freshman at college. She expressed how difficult it was to maintain sobriety on a college campus when even a residential life advisor would ask her for a joint! Some of her last words were," Mom, I need help, I'm coming home, I'm coming home!" Five days short of her coming home on November 17, 2005 she died in her college dorm bed from a heroin overdose.

~B. J. Sanders



*Remembering Lost Promise*