

ADDRESSING THE DRUG EPIDEMIC

Adair County community newspaper tackles addiction head-on

By Robin Roenker

Like many communities across America, Kentucky's Adair County knows the pain of substance abuse. Parents have lost children. Children have lost parents. Many residents there have had their lives upended by addiction — either firsthand, or through relationships with loved ones struggling with substance use disorders.

Adair County isn't alone in this struggle. The issue is one that all 120 Kentucky counties are facing, to one degree or another. According to a recent Overdose Fatality Report compiled by the Kentucky Office of Drug Control Policy, 1,247 Kentuckians died of drug overdoses in 2018 — down from the all-time statewide single-year high of 1,565 drug-related deaths a year earlier.

What sets Adair County apart from many

rural communities, though, is the willingness of local journalists there to consistently and proactively provide in-depth coverage of addiction and its aftermath.

Spearheading this effort has been Sharon Burton, the publisher and editor of both the *Adair County Community Voice*, a weekly paper covering the community, and *The Farmer's Pride*, a statewide publication covering Kentucky's agriculture industry.

"I love my community, but my newspaper philosophy, I'd guess you'd say, is to look at both the positives and the negatives [here]," said Burton, who launched the *Community Voice* in 2002 and *The Farmer's Pride* in 1989. "I think the role of responsible journalism is just to be honest. And that's what we've tried to do from day one."

ACKNOWLEDGING THE PROBLEM

While some communities might prefer to turn a blind eye to the substance use disorder epidemic — for fear that acknowledging drug use within their boundaries might lead to poor publicity — that's simply not Burton's style.

A dedicated, passionate journalist whose work earned her the 2016 Al Smith Award for public service through community journalism by a Kentuckian — an annual honor presented by the University of Kentucky's Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues — Burton knew from the start that ignoring the drug problem in Adair County wouldn't solve

anything. But she felt strongly that shining a light on it just might.

"When you start to write about these things, there's always that concern that people are going to think, 'Oh, this is a terrible place to live.' Or that no one will want to live here or bring their jobs here because of all the drug issues we have going on," Burton said. "We are no worse than any other community in Kentucky [when it comes to substance use]. We're just willing to acknowledge it, and we're trying to work toward solutions. I think that makes us a very progressive community."

Igniting a much-needed conversation in the community

ADAIR COUNTY
COMMUNITY VOICE
Vol. 17, No. 39
Thursday, August 1, 2019
44 pages

THE COST OF ADDICTION



Cally McFall and her son, Briggs.

The cost of addiction runs high.

It has affected every family and every aspect of our community. In this issue, the *Community Voice* begins an ongoing series of articles about the cost of addiction, from personal loss to its impact on tax dollars. Anyone with a story to tell who would like to part of a future article is encouraged to call editor Sharon Burton at 270-334-9454.

Mother suffers greatest cost in loss of daughter

Stacey Wilson knows the greatest cost of addiction — the loss of a child. Stacey's daughter, Cally McFall, died Jan. 28 at the age of 23. Stacey still has trouble coming to terms with her loss, but she speaks out in hopes that she can help others. Cally started using marijuana as a teenager. Stacey believes Cally started taking prescription pills and became an active user around a year before her death. Cally had not "hit rock bottom," a term often used when someone's daily life has deteriorated completely because of drugs. She did, however,

illegally that turned out to be fatal.

"She got a bad pill," Stacey said. Stacey had tried to help Cally, even moving in with her at one point, and she had custody of Cally's son, Briggs. But she stopped short of using a Kentucky law that forces someone with an addiction into a treatment program. "I had the paperwork already filled out, I had my timeline, all I had to do was file it. I didn't do it," Stacey said.

Stacey wanted Cally to attend a doctor's appointment she had scheduled for Briggs, so she put off filing and deal

THE COST OF ADDICTION

Jails, courts overflow from drug offenses

The complications from our nation's drug epidemic go deep. Obviously affecting users and their loved ones the most, it severely also impacts many areas of local government.

With law enforcement agencies struggling to keep up with the volume of cases, many courts are also struggling to keep up with the volume of cases.

THE COST OF ADDICTION:

System watching over children is overburdened

When prosecutor Russell appeared before Circuit Judge Judy Vance Murphy for 5-year-old son, Murphy expressed shock that Russell even left the hospital with her newborn child. "To be honest this court is appalled. I've been appalled from

works ago, disgusted to know that this baby not only died with meth in his system but was born with meth in his system and the mother and her husband were with Mr. Russell, Judge Murphy said. Russell was sentenced to nine and a half years in prison after

gally. Commonwealth's Attorney Wren Wright originally recommended six and half years but increased the recommendation after Russell missed two mandatory drug tests that tested positive for substance pictures after appearing in court for sentencing on May 26. Russell's son, Dakota, the

Matt, was born Sept. 16, 2017 and died Oct. 24, 2017. A medical examiner ruled that Dakota died from positional asphyxia, a condition where he was unable to breathe. That finding alone, however, does not tell the

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Burton and her six-person *Community Voice* staff have addressed addiction frankly from the paper's earliest days. The newspaper's first edition, published in November 2002, featured a cover story about local resident Allen Owens, who shared his journey to sobriety and a newfound mission to help others battling substance use disorders. (In 2019, Burton did a follow-up story with Owens, who is still drug free. "It was really a fun story to do. He's a great guy and a great success story," Burton said. "We were sitting in his living room, and he was basically saying, 'This is what you can have, if you stay off drugs. I think he's an inspiration to many people.'")

In 2017, the *Community Voice* ran a series of stories about the paths to recovery taken by

THE COST OF ADDICTION

While the *Community Voice*'s 2017 recovery series showcased uplifting stories of local citizens' healing and renewal following addiction, one event, in particular, that year gutted the entire Adair County community and drove home the message that no one — no matter how young — was immune to the drug epidemic.

On Oct. 24, 2017, a five-week-old baby, who had been born with traces of meth in his system, died of positional asphyxia — meaning he was in a position which left him unable to breathe. A law enforcement investigation revealed that the baby's mother, who had been using meth, awoke to find him dead.

Burton covered the case extensively from start to finish in the *Community Voice*, culminating with a story about the mother's 2019 sentencing after she entered an Alford plea to a manslaughter charge. As part of the newspaper's coverage, Burton launched a formal open records request with the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services to investigate why social services allowed the baby to remain in the mother's care after he was born with drugs in his system.

"That whole thing left a lot of questions for me," said Burton, who earned a degree in journalism from Western Kentucky University in 1972 and now serves as vice president of the Kentucky Press Association. "How do a mother and baby both come home from the hospital together when both tested positive for meth?

community members who had previously had a substance use disorder.

"Our goal with that series was to share good news — that there is hope for people struggling with addiction," said Burton, who found local sources to be not only willing but eager to share their painful experiences with drug use — seeing it as an opportunity to aid someone else.

"The number one message I want other people in the [local journalism] industry to know is that people are willing to share their stories because they want to help others," she said. "There's nobody more understanding about what a person with addiction is going through than a person who has gone through it — or who has had a family member go through it — themselves."

Where's our government, who is supposed to be looking out for our children?"

Another drug-related tragedy rocked Adair County in January 2019, when the 23-year-old daughter of Stacey Wilson, a beloved community figure, died of an overdose.

"The community loves this woman," Burton said. "And when she lost her daughter to drugs, it devastated all of us."

Wilson shared her heart-wrenching story of loss in an August 1 *Community Voice* cover story that launched the newspaper's 2019 series dedicated to spotlighting "The Cost of Addiction." In the article, Wilson expressed her deepest regret: failing to formally file paperwork, which she had filled out, to have her daughter involuntarily admitted for drug abuse treatment.

In Kentucky, Casey's Law, passed in 2004, allows parents, relatives or friends of a substance use-impaired person to lawfully intervene and request involuntary, court-ordered addiction treatment for their loved one. In her raw interview with Burton, Wilson shared how her daughter overdosed from a pill laced with fentanyl — just before Wilson could officially file the Casey's Law petition.

"The bottom line is, she was going to get [legally mandated treatment] for her daughter and she didn't. So she started sharing her story and posting on social media, telling people that was her biggest regret," Burton said.



Adair County *Community Voice* editor and publisher Sharon Burton and assistant editor Anna Buckman don't shy away from covering topics that other local newspapers are more likely to avoid. Burton's philosophy is "to look at both the positives and the negatives" in the community.



Burton addresses how small town newspapers can cover substance use and recovery in their communities during a one-day workshop for reporters held in November 2019 in Ashland.

BREAKING THE STIGMA

While the *Community Voice* has around 3,200 paying subscribers, Burton sent the August 1 "Cost of Addiction" edition containing Wilson's story — along with articles about Casey's Law and the ways the drug epidemic is overburdening the childhood social service system and crowding jails and courts — to all residences in the county.

"We mail more than 8,000 copies when we do a county wide distribution," Burton said. "We thought it was important to reach [*Community Voice*] readers and non-readers to encourage dialogue about substance abuse and recovery and its impact on our community."

Subsequent issues in the series examined, among other topics, one mother's story of forcing her daughter into treatment, holistic recovery services available at Isaiah House Treatment Center — which operates three campuses in Kentucky — and Burton's personal experiences attending a Columbia Al Anon meeting and visiting the Adair County Health Department's needle exchange program.

"Our local health department actually has [a] 117 percent return on syringes," Burton said, noting that many participants pick up needles

they find and return them as well.

"I wanted people to see what the program really does. I called the nurse that runs the exchange and asked to come through. I said, 'I don't want you to treat me like a journalist. I want to be like a regular client using the service,'" Burton said. "You could really see, in that story, that this was a place where people dealing with addiction could get help and feel loved."

Community health worker Misty May was one of the people Burton encountered during her needle exchange-clinic visit. May, who is now 14 years drug free, had previously openly shared her journey to sobriety in a 2017 *Community Voice* recovery series article.

When asked whether the newspaper's coverage has helped establish a community dialogue about the drug problem in the county, May answered unequivocally.

"They're helping change the stigma [surrounding addiction]," she said. "The real-life stories that Sharon has been sharing show that there is positivity and hope and that recovery is possible. Families see that they don't have to be ashamed [to ask for help], because this is an issue that doesn't discriminate."

“ I don't know of another weekly newspaper in this country that has done as good of a job covering this topic as the *Adair County Community Voice*. ”

Al Cross, Director, UK's Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues

Local newspapers often avoid holding up an unflattering mirror to the community they serve, but Burton and the *Community Voice* do "an excellent job of that when it needs to be done," said Al Cross, director of UK's Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues. "She doesn't sensationalize things. She's an excellent storyteller, and she knows how to find really good examples to illustrate [issues]. People like to read about people. They don't like to read [only] about policies and programs."

Burton's dedication to covering Adair County's drug problem has earned statewide

and national notice. Last August, the website of The Poynter Institute — a nonprofit journalism school and research organization based in St. Petersburg, Florida — ran a story spotlighting the *Community Voice*'s drug coverage, and in November, Burton led a journalism workshop on covering substance abuse, sponsored by the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues and Oak Ridge Associated Universities.

"I don't know of another weekly newspaper in this country that has done as good of a job covering this topic as the *Adair County Community Voice*," Cross said.

A SPRINGBOARD FOR CHANGE

While the drug epidemic has been a major focus of the *Community Voice*'s public health coverage, the paper hasn't shied away from tackling other major health issues facing the county as well.

"The newspaper closely covered debate surrounding Adair County's 2016 wet-dry vote, for example, and last October, *Community Voice* assistant editor Anna Buckman helped raise awareness of a little-known tick-borne allergy to red meat, known as Alpha-gal syndrome, which has been reported in the community.

Buckman, an Adair County native who began at the paper as an intern while studying at Lindsey Wilson College, said she's proud to work at a mission-driven publication like the *Community Voice*.

"Sharon always has an approach of honesty. She says the hard things that no one else is willing to say," Buckman said. "I'm very proud to work for this paper because we cover the things that need to be covered and say the things that people need to hear."

"The *Community Voice*'s substance abuse coverage has captured the attention of the community. Buckman said residents often stop her after church or around town to talk about things she and Burton have written. And recently, a coalition of area church pastors has begun to meet to brainstorm ways to better address the problem.

In the meantime, Burton has no plans to stop covering the issue.

"Take everything we cover, there has to be a balance," she said. "We don't want to cause reader burnout. With that said, we won't be dropping the issue, because it's too important. When we see good things going on in the community to help people struggling with addiction, we want to be there to support those efforts." •

LEARN MORE
READ THE ADAIR COUNTY COMMUNITY VOICE'S "COST OF ADDICTION" SERIES ONLINE AT [HTTPS://ADAIRVOICE.COM](https://adairvoice.com)

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