



## Johnny's Story

"To me, altruism means being selfless or giving to other people, even when there may be nothing to gain and something to lose. Altruistic people do things for the collective interest instead of their own." — Johnny Stack

Johnny Stack was born on February 7, 2000 and died by suicide on November 20, 2019 at the age of 19. He was a funny, charming young man. We are a typical suburban family and did typical family things. He had a happy life, a 4.0 GPA with a scholarship to college, and a family who loved him very much. **Unfortunately, we lived in Colorado, which was the first state to legalize marijuana in 2014, when Johnny was 14 years old.**

Johnny used marijuana for years, starting at age 14 at a high school party. He struggled with social anxiety and panic attacks in high school, which were successfully managed with support, prescription medications, and therapy. He could have been fine. Then at about 16 years old (when he could drive), Johnny discovered dabbing marijuana and believed it helped his anxiety. When I said "dabbing" just now, did you think it was a typo for "dabbling"? Did you know what I meant when I said he was dabbing? Not everyone does. Do you understand the difference between smoking cannabis flower and dabbing high-THC concentrates, such as wax, oil, shatter, or budder (not a typo)? Most of my friends look at me blankly when I say these words and say, "I've never even heard about this" or "I have no idea what you're talking about."

**Yes, we still live in Colorado. Yes, it is everywhere. Yes, here any kid can get it unless you chain them to their beds.**

He entered college as a marijuana user. We would dis-enroll him from his current university when called about his odd behavior, admit him to mental hospitals, and they would stabilize him with medications, and he'd recover...until he did the drugs again. He would try other illicit drugs as well. Eventually, even when he stopped using marijuana, the psychosis did not go away, and he developed full-blown schizophrenia.

He was put on antipsychotics to control the delusions, but he didn't like how "stupid" they made him feel. So, he would stop taking them without telling us (a common problem with the disorder). When he died, he had given up smoking, he wasn't on drugs, and he wasn't depressed. But because he wouldn't take the medications he now needed, the paranoid delusions told him to stop the pain, and he jumped.

Three days before he passed, he came over for dinner. He lived in our condo a couple miles down the street and would often pop in for a home-cooked meal. "I need to tell you that you were right," he says to me. **"Right about what?" I ask. "Right about the marijuana. You told me weed would hurt my brain, and it's ruined my mind and my life. You were right all along. I'm sorry, and I love you."** He died by suicide three days later.

You may be thinking, "C'mon, Laura, it's no big deal – it's just pot." "Pot's legal, so it must be safe." Or "I did pot when I was a kid, too, and look, it didn't hurt me."

*Well, have you recently studied TODAY'S pot, and have you personally seen its effects on your children like I have?*

Why is it so different? First, the tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), a crystalline compound that is the main active ingredient of cannabis that gives the “high,” is extracted out of the cannabis so that it’s nearly pure. THC is the principal psychoactive constituent of cannabis. Then a butane torch is used to heat the crystals (similar to beeswax) or oil in a “rig” (just google it), or a vaping device with a heating element called a dab pen can be used. Forget the “grass” or “papers” that were rolled in the 70s and 80s. The pot we grew up with (10% or less THC content) is HUGELY different than today’s high-concentrate extracts (often 80% THC content or higher).

The brain is still developing through a person’s 20s, and psychotic disorders typically develop in the late teenage years. During brain formation, heavy cannabis use has been shown to have a negative effect on the formation of neural pathways. It can also lead to heavier drug use. While the vast majority of marijuana smokers never experience permanent mental illness, researchers have found that the earlier and heavier someone starts dabbing, the more likely it is that they will develop a disorder at some point (often years later).

The harmful combination of a still-forming mind, high-potency THC products, and a high frequency of use = Cannabis-Induced Psychosis. Yes, that’s a real diagnosis (or High-THC Abuse – Severe). Repeated CIP incidents can trigger schizophrenia or other mental illness, and even when the cannabis is withdrawn, the psychosis doesn’t go away.

This is what happened to my beautiful boy. When he died, the toxicology report showed he had ZERO drugs in his system. His note said the mob was after him, the university was an FBI base, and the whole world knew everything about him. He wasn’t depressed, neglected, drugged, or unloved. He was psychotic, paranoid, and delusional, and he jumped from a 6-story building in his pain. He refused the anti-psychotic drugs that he now needed, because he thought he wasn’t sick (common to schizophrenia).

As parents, grandparents, friends, and counselors, we must first educate ourselves about the dangers of high-THC marijuana. Then we must warn our children when they are young (10-12 years old) and use hyper-vigilance in the early teen years. This is much easier to do before the age of 16 when they can drive, as you can’t lock them up or monitor them 24/7. They need to understand what this is, before “that friend” shows up at a party offering dabs.

I am compelled to help increase awareness about dabbing and prevent more senseless deaths.