

Move Beyond Your Local Heroin Dealer: Just Keep Walkin'

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - In Dayton, Ohio, the local morgue has refrigerated trailers outside, because the heroin epidemic has become so rampant there.

Jack Wilcox moved from Dayton to Palmyra, Illinois, with his daughter and son-in-law. He left behind a son (also named Jack) who died of an overdose on Nov. 27, 2015. Wilcox, an addict in recovery himself, said he was only six months sober after relapsing following more than 18 years of sobriety when he received the call. He said his entire life and outlook on life changed after that call.

"I have done everything under the sun, but put a needle in my arm," Wilcox said. "I never did that, but when anyone ever gets a phone call like that, your life changes immediately. They said, 'I'm sorry to tell you, but your son, Jack, just died of a heroin overdose. I decided that day my son's name is not going in vain. I didn't know what at that time, but I want something positive to come out of it.'"

That positive legacy is "Just Keep Walkin'." Wilcox said he took the name from a song by Christian artist Toby Mac, and he embodies it through his efforts to bring more people to treatment. Wilcox said the movement has brought as many as 30 people to treatment. He also operates a support group at Alton Memorial Hospital every Thursday Evening at 6:30 p.m. for people who have lost loved ones to the heroin epidemic.

"It's grief support for people who have lost people to drugs or alcohol, and we also cater to anyone who is still using or is being affected by someone who is," Wilcox said. "It's getting worse, it's not getting any better."

Unfortunately, Wilcox said his support group has been starting pretty small. He said there is a stigma attached to people who die from addiction.

"It's going kind of slow, but I understand why, because people feel ashamed," he said. "People ask themselves if they could have done this or that better and blame themselves - and we can't do that. People don't want to be connected to a support group that takes them into that stigma."

To help break that stigma, Wilcox meets with families and addicts while also hosting a radio show every Tuesday evening on a Collinsville-based Internet radio station called Riot Radio with Ty Bechel of Amare. Bechel gave an interview to Riverbender.com for [yesterday's piece on the heroin epidemic](#).

Another way Wilcox has spread awareness of the heroin epidemic was through the embodiment of Keep on Walkin'. He once walked from Alton to Springfield with the goal of taking some of the concerns of those suffering from the heroin epidemic to the governor's office.

"I met with Alton Mayor Brant Walker and Alton Police Chief Jason "Jake" Simmons, who is also on our board, before I went," Wilcox said. "They gave me a list of the right people to talk to along the way."

Wilcox said he started the three day walk, with a distance of 75 miles, after stepping out of the shower one day and hearing a calling from God. He said a thought in his head told him walking to Springfield would bring the sort of awareness the situation needed.

Once he arrived in Springfield, Wilcox said he was able to meet with one of Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner's top aides. After an hour-long conversation, Wilcox said he left feeling pretty disappointed with the state's dedication to the problem.

"Everybody in the world knows Illinois is broke," he said. "But certain things can still happen. Money is not coming out of anywhere to help, and people are dying all over the place. They are being pushed into the dark, out of the way, to die."



He said Madison County State's Attorney Tom Gibbons is being more proactive than the state, saying he wants to target the "big-time" dealers who utilize the interstate infrastructure in Madison County to ship heroin to Chicago and then back to St. Louis ([as he also told Riverbender.com in a previous article](#)). Wilcox was invited by Gibbons to attend the Partnership for a Drug Free Community meetings being held to help defeat the heroin epidemics.

"I was able to get involved in the treatment segment of it," Wilcox said. "That was the thing Tom said at the last meeting. They aren't after the little guys, we're after the big guys. He said the street-level dealers aren't worth a hill of beans - even though they are the ones that are giving it to the people. In my opinion, he's right, it's the big guys we want taken down."

Those big guys come through Madison County from the Southwestern United States from Mexican drug cartels and from the East Coast from Afghan poppy fields. He said, while Madison County may be the heroin passes through and sometimes ends, Jersey County is being hit even harder.

"There are so many people in Jersey County I'm told need to talk about their grief with this epidemic," Wilcox said. "But, we can't get any one them to come, because of the stigma. They want everybody to think everything is OK, but everything isn't OK. It's horrible, it's a bad thing, but it happened. You don't have to live your life with the grief and horror of having lost your child to heroin. You can't control what happens to you, but you can control what happens in you. You have to let people see in, so you can see out. You can have a happy, joyous and free life again."

Spirituality is one of the cornerstones of Wilcox's mission. Upon coming to Alton, he started attending Enjoy Church, which he said is unlike any other church he has seen, saying people dressed in all fashions from all walks of life can attend and feel like a part of the service.

One of the pastors from that church, Ryan Hardin, is also on the Just Keep Walkin' Board with Simmons, Jason Harrison and Gateway Treatment Center at Caseyville Supervisor Jason Ford.

In the future, Wilcox is scheduled to speak in Cedar Hill, Missouri, Wentzville, Missouri and Grafton regarding heroin, and is going to hold another rally in Springfield featuring several speakers well-versed in various issues of the heroin epidemic. That rally will take place at the statue of Lincoln on May 17, 2017.