

Chris Gray:
Hi, I'm Chris Gray.

Scotty Sandow:
I am Scotty Sandow and this is the One Pill Can Kill podcast.

Chris Gray:
Futures don't come much brighter than Zach Didier's. It's 17. Zach was a standout student at Rocklin Whitney High School, a star athlete and actor, a self-taught musician. He could have done anything. Everyone thought so. Here's his mom, Laura.

Laura Didier:
He was so happy. Even from the very beginning as a baby, he was a good baby and the cutest toddler and distilled on by his big sister and big brother. He lit up a room. He truly did. I know so many parents say that, but when we lost him and so many friends that we knew and friends of his that we didn't really know reached out to us just to share personal stories about how he impacted their life. And that he was always smiling at school and always ready to tear someone up and encouraged them.

Laura Didier:
And even his theater teacher referred to him as really like a mentor to his peer group that he would really inspire others. He was so gifted at everything really that he did. He put us all into it. He was so gifted, but he was also really modest about it. And that was one thing. Recently one of his best friends shared a note with us about how inspired he was by that here was Zach, that was a straight A student, and started the musical, and was on the track team and doing all these amazing things he said.

Laura Didier:
But he had every reason to be boastful. He said that Zach was always modest about it and just always encouraged and elevated everybody around him to do their best. And so I know he's left a really positive mark on the people that he got to know in life and he was an incredible person.

Scotty Sandow:
The Didiers had been a military family before they moved to Rocklin. Their daughter Alex is the oldest, middle child Sam followed in his father's footsteps by becoming an air force pilot. Zach the youngest of the Didier kids had the maturity beyond his years. Here's his dad Chris.

Chris Didier:
I think that one of the attributes that I admired, I still admire about our son Zach, is that he liked to pay attention to what other people said and what he observed to hear the other side. And even if he didn't necessarily agree with it, whether it's conservative, liberal, black, white, up and down, light dark, he really tried to make a fair assessment.

Chris Didier:

And I think that brought a lot of wisdom in him and helped him see the bigger picture in his challenges in life and helped lead him to success as a straight A student. He loved to challenge himself and I think he relished in succeeding.

Chris Gray:

Zach's latest triumph had been a new one, the stage. A love for music, the theater, the arts, it was something special he and his mom shared. That's Laura singing here with Zach on the ukulele.

Laura Didier:

(Singing) We use to sing in a jazz band, actually. I love musical theater. That was something that was really special for myself and Zach. My mom introduced me to musical theater as a young child. And I was hoping to pass that on to my kids as well. And the one that had stuck with was Zach.

Laura Didier:

(Singing) Zach and I just really resonated with each other. The things that lit me up lit him up. It was in high school that he really got the bug to put himself out there and be really step into his bravery in performing. He was such a natural actor and singer and performer. And it was so cool to see that. And I pictured this whole future of going to shows with him and introducing his kids to it. And hopefully they would love it as much as their grandma and their dad. But that all got ripped away. It was two days after Christmas.

Scotty Sandow:

We should pause here to take note that this was December 2020, COVID emerged earlier in the year and Zach, like all kids his age was dealing with the stress and disappointment of missing out on so many of the things he'd been looking forward to in his senior year. The music you're hearing is Zach on the piano. You'll hear him playing again in a moment with his dog, accompanying him in the background.

Laura Didier:

On Christmas Eve, Zach just seemed a little bit more tired than normal. It was not uncommon especially during the lockdowns for he and his friends to stay up later than they should playing video games. Because they were so restricted on what they could do in person. So he and his friends had taken to Minecraft and they could play in their rooms and converse with each other and build worlds.

Chris Didier:

It was just after Christmas and everyone's just kind of chilling out because there's always a lot of things going on before Christmas to get all your shopping done. There's so many things happening at once. And so the 26 is just a chill day and Zach had plans to hang out with friends. He has a very good circle of friends. I know his friends very well. Most of them, I coach soccer and vacation with him, his friends and families, and we're pretty tight knit group.

Chris Didier:

And he wanted to hang out with his girlfriend, showed responsibility in being home when he said he would be home. And that night he said, "Hey, dad want to watch a Christmas movie?" And that's our kind of our tradition with the kids is to watch as many of the different Christmas movies during the

season. And I said, "Sounds great." And he got home earlier than his curfew and he seemed totally normal. And Alex and Sam, Zach's other siblings were hanging out and the interactions were normal.

Chris Didier:

And I said, "Hey Zack, did you want to watch a movie it's getting late?" And he said, "Yeah. Of course." And he grabbed some snacks to eat. The dogs were on the couch. Zach was chilling, doing exactly what we've always experienced. He didn't appear inebriated, he didn't appear to be impacted in any way like he was high or anything. He just walked and talked and acted very normal. And we watched the movie together the whole time. And it was after midnight when it was finished and it was late and it was time for everyone to go to bed.

Chris Didier:

And he said, "All right, dad. Goodnight. I love you." And that was the last I had talked to Zach. Our other kids also stay up late watching mountain biking videos or other things. And they usually wake up late, usually after 10 or 11. So not uncommon to be after 12 or 1 even, especially Zach. Zach's usually the last one out, but it was in the early afternoon I was working on a project with Alex in the garage. We were doing something organizing our mountain bike, little counter there. And I thought where's Zach and it's getting late.

Chris Didier:

And I went into his room and he didn't respond. And I walked in and saw that he was asleep or it appeared to be asleep at his computer desk and the computer screen was on. And so I'm confused. Was he there all night or did he go to bed and then wake up and then get on the computer and didn't get much sleep and fell asleep, I didn't know. So my first reaction was Zach buddy, what's going on. And I think I was within two feet from him and instantly sense something awful has happened.

Chris Didier:

And I discovered he was not breathing and he was starting to turn blue. He was already so little stiff and my world was destroyed at that point. My training kicked in and went into reaction mode attempted to start CPR. My closest other child I noticed nearby, his name is Sam and I yelled at Sam call 911. He came in the room with a phone with the 911 operator. And that person was very good at trying to talk to me. She said, I've got emergency vehicles on the way. And she coached me along with the counting part. EMTs arrived shortly after that, a police officer arrived and then some sheriff people.

Chris Didier:

They immediately pull me away and they bring in their equipment and they start working on Zach while I am being questioned by authorities. Well, it was only a few minutes, maybe three or five minutes later, they said, "I'm so sorry, but it's too late." And I didn't accept that. I didn't want to just, okay. That's the way it goes. I grew up with the mindset of failure is not an option and I absolutely refused to accept that. So I kind of got hostile and I argued that is not going to happen. Get on him now.

Chris Didier:

Whereas the defibrillator and the guys saw me or I saw where they were looking and I saw the defib. And so I went for it and one of the med techs pushed it aside and said, "I'm sorry." And I looked at him and I said, "Get the epi's out and helped me save my son."

Chris Didier:

And they said, "I'm sorry." And so I resumed CPR myself and started yelling at these gentlemen. One of you guys has to help me here while I was doing CPR I was being directive and telling them, get this defibrillator, you get the defibrillator, you get an epi. My guys you're not helping me out here. And then they just were nonresponsive. They were standing near me. And then I started talking. I started talking to Zach and I cried out his name. I begged him, don't go, come back. I probably cried out to him that maybe a dozen times. And I later learned that my children heard that.

Chris Didier:

And I think they've been traumatized hearing their father cry to their brother. And sometime a few minutes later, someone pulled me away and I got really upset. How can you stop me from saving my son? How can you stop me like this? And I looked up and there were seven or eight of these individuals, these EMTs and sheriff and police. And they were all crying. And the look on their face was just gut wrenching, sadness and profound grief and agony in their faces because they could see what was happening.

Chris Didier:

And that's when I just lost it and cried in like a fetal position. And it was the most horrific experience of my life. Then I had to go downstairs and share the news with Sam and Alex.

Laura Didier:

It was in all of that chaos that our daughter called me. And I had been actually running a virtual half marathon with a girlfriend. And ironically, we met up with another friend on the trail that we hadn't seen in a while. And we were all catching up, "Oh, what are your kids doing? What are your kids doing?" And I literally was giving them the sound bites on each of the kids. And so Alex called me and I was already going to be coming to see the kids later that day. But she said, "You need to get here now mom, you need to get to the house right now. Zach." She kind of let it slip what had happened.

Laura Didier:

Of course I started screaming and then she kind of tried to pull back. I think she realized mom's got to drive. She can't fall apart. So she kind of pulled back like, "No they're working on in the hospital. The ambulance is here." But when I pulled up to the house, I knew it was really bad. There was no ambulance. Everybody was on the driveway. And I walked up and Chris he just said, "Our baby's gone." And Alex and Sam were immediately on either side of me just holding me up.

Laura Didier:

Once they had done everything they needed to do at the house, they asked us if we wanted to come and say goodbye. And I was so torn because they were like, it's really up to you. But he doesn't really look the same. I debated it, do I want to see him that way? Do I? But I thought he can't leave this house without his mom saying goodbye. So they said, "We'll just kind of cover his face, like maybe to his eyebrows or something. And then you can say goodbye like that."

Laura Didier:

So he was on a stretcher and when we could say goodbye and he was just laying across his body, it felt like a long time. I have no idea how long it was. And everybody was so patient all standing around, not

wanting to rush us. And I just rubbed his hair. He had the best hair, he had the best hair and he loved his hair and I just rubbed it and said goodbye. They had grief people stay with us for hours after they took Zach and just talked to us about the different kinds of grief resources. And they were so compassionate and kind, and then Zach's girlfriend. They were so close.

Laura Didier:

They'd been together a year. And her family was like family to Zach. So we had to let her family know. And they actually sent county grief folks over to their house too, for her and her family, which was really kind. And then my parents got to the house and then it just became this blur, this fog. This can't... Then you start thinking like, who do we call? How do we sort of share this information? And then also you're dealing with the grief. They searched his room, they found no drugs. They rolled suicide out immediately because there was no indication of self harm. They were asking us, did he have any medical conditions that you knew about? No we didn't at all.

Laura Didier:

And they said, he seemed really kind of tired like on Christmas day, a little more tired than normal. But then Chris said the next day he seemed like himself again. So I don't know. And that was the first time that we heard the word fentanyl. It was from the coroner's office when they said we've been seeing a sharp rise in fentanyl deaths in Placer County. And we're going to suspect if nothing turns up in the autopsy with regard to his health, that we're going to find fentanyl in the toxicology report.

Laura Didier:

So that was the first time we ever had heard about that. We had had every drug conversation with our kids that we knew to have. And Alex and Sam had never struggled with drugs or alcohol. We'd never seen any indication of that with Zach. So we thought we had covered everything we needed to cover. And he certainly was still on his A game with school and athletics and all these things. So we hadn't seen any kind of change that would indicate he was struggling with anything.

Chris Didier:

It was a WTF experience for our family. What's this fentanyl. You're trying to explain to us how would fentanyl get in our house yet alone our child's body? How is that even remotely possible? It doesn't make any sense.

Chris Gray:

A few weeks after Zach's death, the toxicology report came back and confirmed that Zach's death was in fact caused by fentanyl poisoning. And the Didier's faced a painful choice in their grief.

Laura Didier:

Chris and I, the kids we talked it through and said, if they confirm that this is what it is, then we're going to tell everybody we know that we're going to put a face to this crisis and make sure people understand that there's a whole nother aspect of the drug conversation that you have to have with your kids, no matter how high achieving there are. Whether you've sensed they're struggling with anything or not, it just has to be these counterfeit pills. This fentanyl crisis has to be part of the conversation.

Laura Didier:

Unfortunately, with any type of a drug death, there's a stigma that gets attached. There's a lot of victim blaming that goes on and we've heard it. When we went public, I made the mistake reading some comments that people who don't know us, who didn't know Zach, just writing horrific things. And I questioned like, are we doing the right thing? Are we tarnishing our beautiful boy's memory?

Laura Didier:

But every time I thought that I remembered the faces of his friends, learning about his death and their eyes widening like, what are you talking about? We've never heard of this. And I just would armor back up like, okay, I'm going to have to deal with this kind of crap from people who don't know us and don't want to hear what the story is. And soldier on to warn young people.

Chris Didier:

There is a growing significant danger to society. Most people just don't get or understand. What makes us so much more painful, I think is that it's impacting Americans who are innocent, who are unwittingly consuming, something they don't realize is going to kill them. This is in our country, in our homes, our apartments, our dorm rooms in the privacy of our children's bedrooms. And it absolutely needs to stop. We're all potentially at risk here.

Laura Didier:

It's kind of like a perfect storm of these elements coming together, the accessibility, the lethality, the mental health, the struggles that kids have had through the pandemic. Rightfully so all the things that young people are facing, it really is just like this perfect storm. And unfortunately, because there was no, it was really new to our area. There wasn't any awareness yet that chasm of this information gap, our son fell into it. And we're just trying to fill that gap with information and go to schools. We've been to countless high schools and middle schools.

Speaker 6:

Today with concern and compassion in their eyes.

Laura Didier:

He got it through Snapchat. That was how he got the pill.

Speaker 6:

The school's student government team listened to Zach's parents share their heartbreaking story.

Chris Didier:

Much harder now than it was when I was your age.

Speaker 7:

We have become influenced and we have become educated. And we shift that into becoming influencers and we become educators. And by spreading awareness everywhere, that's how we can save lives.

Chris Didier:

I think that Zach's story has helped open a lot of doors because the story we shared earlier today about who Zach is and how, or what happened to Zach, it's really hard to ignore that and not be moved by that because so many parents with teenagers are thinking, holy cow, they feel a kind of like they're indebted to knowing this information. There's so many different lanes that we've had an opportunity to share our story and to explain the danger and to the statistics to show it. But we still believe there's a lot of work in front of us.

Laura Didier:

So people may be hearing Zach's story a lot. They may be seeing Zach's face and hearing Zach's story a lot, but they shouldn't think that Zach's the only kid. There are so many, so many more of us out here.

Speaker 8:

And new at 11 o'clock Chula Vista police are working to crack down on drug dealers targeting young people in the community. This after two teenagers recently overdosed on fentanyl, one of them died.

Speaker 9:

I had a heartbroken mother telling us her teenage son died after unknowingly taken a lethal dose of fentanyl.

Speaker 10:

The Georgia department of health, now warning that 66 people in Georgia have overdosed on the drug in the last month alone, the youngest only 10 years of age.

Speaker 11:

The suspected overdose deaths of two teenagers who sparking an urgent warning from Prince William County police. The [inaudible 00:26:46] we've learned a teenage girl overdosed and died in a Colorado Springs classroom as the result of taking fentanyl.

Laura Didier:

My child died. It was supposed to be the safest place and his bedroom of his own home.

Speaker 14:

14 year old killed by drugs. He got from a dealer he met over a Snapchat. Now a family hopes their story can serve as a warning to other parents.

Scotty Sandow:

A quick note here about how we talk about fentanyl, just like you heard, it's common to hear fentanyl related deaths described as overdoses, but you'll hear the Didier's and other families who've lost loved ones, call them poisonings. And that's what they're called in the one pill can kill campaign. Very few people intend to take fentanyl. Like very few people intend to take poison.

Laura Didier:

We need to have compassionate empathy for people, but what can happen if the headline says overdose then a family like ours or parents might think, oh, my kids are not using drugs. I don't need to

worry about an overdose story fast forward. But if they hear a story that says people are being poisoned and deceived, they're consuming fentanyl when they don't intend to consume fentanyl, you're going to listen to that story.

Chris Gray:

And listening to these stories, removing the stigma and having candid conversations about the dangers of fentanyl. That's the key to protecting your own kids Laura says.

Laura Didier:

I would just say that trying to be as judgment free, trying to be as loving as possible is the first step we felt that we were that way with Zach. We both had very close relationships with the kids, but the part that we didn't know to say was Zach, if you feel you're struggling, you're stressed, anxious having any kind of pain don't ever go to social media with that. Anything that someone's going to try to sell to you or share with you is not going to be real. Go to the real resources. If you need help, please ask, please go to a coach, to us, to the doctor, whatever.

Laura Didier:

And just to understand that this deception is happening and that kids really, they are being targeted. And the reason they are is they're being targeted to become addicted to fentanyl. It's so highly addictive that if you don't, I mean, Zach unfortunately encountered a deadly pill within days of experimenting. And he didn't even have a chance to develop any kind of an addiction, but some of these young people are.

Laura Didier:

And it's a really tough addiction. So I would just say, even if you don't think your child is struggling in any way or you have any clues or red flags that they might be inclined to try a drug, you have to have the conversation around the deceptiveness of this, that they don't have to be looking for fentanyl to get it, that this is how it's being disguised.

Chris Didier:

Modern day parenting is probably the hardest than any time before because the drug landscape is extremely different. It is not the same. It's more of like a minefield now my best advice is to learn about the danger, get educated, get smart on what's happening. So listening to this podcast is a great start and ask others who have been impacted like this. And then just have an honest sit down, talk with your kids, talk to the parents of your kids' friends and let them understand and get them educated.

Chris Didier:

And to just simply say, "Guys, as you're a parent, I am very scared because things are different now than they were before." In the past, when I was in high school, if I wanted to experiment, try underage drinking or whatever, the worst thing that could happen is I get a hangover or I'd feel nauseous, or I'd usually feel guilty the next day. Well today the reaction would just be you die with literally within minutes.

Chris Didier:

So it's so different. And if I had the chance to talk to Zach, I'd say, "Son, I feel so bad for your generation. It's unfair because your generation now has to face a danger that's so severe and so immediate that it's like, you really have to be intensely careful."

Scotty Sandow:

It's been a year and a half since Zach's death. The Didier's continue to honor Zach through their outreach, but in more personal ways too, in April, Laura ran the Boston marathon in Zach's memory.

Laura Didier:

I had actually run Boston. The first time I had qualified in 2015, I ran it in 2017 and the way it fell with the school year, the kids weren't able to come. So when I came home from running Boston in 2017, my kids had made this wonderful poster. Congratulations, very clever, very sweet. And in Zach's section, he wrote how proud he was. And he said, "Maybe next time I'll run it with you mom." And it wasn't just a comment he was an athlete, he was a runner.

Laura Didier:

So I believed that could be possible, that we could run it together. So prior to losing him, I had qualified again for Boston. So Zach was very proud and excited. And he also, when I ran it the first time I had brought the kids home, Boston strong shirts, and Zach wore his Boston strong shirt a lot. And so then I had gotten in, but with the pandemic there wasn't a Boston. So right away. And it wasn't until after he died that I was able to apply for the race and I was accepted into the race.

Laura Didier:

And it was actually... It gave me something to kind of work toward, because it's very easy to just slip into despair. It's very easy to not want to put one foot in front of the other and just cry every day. But having that goal, trying to do it in his memory and in his honor and to raise awareness helps give me something to kind of focus on. And so I made a bib with his face and running for my son who was killed by a counterfeit pill. And so I got some notice around that at the race, trying to raise awareness about this issue.

Laura Didier:

My parents came, two of my college roommates came and they made t-shirts and the support was tremendous, but it was more just wanting to feel him with me. He was with me for sure. And I actually got a tattoo for Zach and in honor of him. And the words that are on there were written by Zach. So when he was a freshman, he had written a letter, it was something Whitney High School did. You write a letter as a freshman to your senior self. So you write the letter, you seal it and the counselors hold onto it. And then upon graduation week, they give you back your senior letter, but he died six months before.

Laura Didier:

So his counselor called me and his counselor's amazing Mr. Late and said, "I have Zach's senior letter." So my son and I went over and got it at the school. And he had a lot written in there. And the conclusion said, "In conclusion." And the first sense is what's on here. It says, "Always remember, our friends, family, dogs, and potential we have in life." And then it continued to say, "Good luck on whatever project you're working on right now. Don't forget to smile and have the best day of your life. Zach." And

This transcript was exported on Jul 13, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

that's how he lived. And I feel like the best way to feel him with me and to honor him is to try to live the way he did.

Chris Gray:

Sadly, Zach's story is one of dozens like it in Placer County in just the past few years. There's a lot we still need to talk about. What exactly makes fentanyl so dangerous? How big is the fentanyl problem in Placer county? What's being done to educate our kids, go after the drug dealers. We'll cover that and more and upcoming episodes of the One Pill Can Kill podcast. I'm Chris Gray.

Scotty Sandow:

And I'm Scotty Sandow. Stay tuned. (singing)