

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Contact: Elyzabeth Marcussen, 443-837-1559  
[emarcussen@hospicechesapeake.org](mailto:emarcussen@hospicechesapeake.org)

**A SAFE PLACE AWAY FROM THE STIGMA**  
**Substance abuse loss support group is a judgement free zone**

(PASADENA, MD, July 13, 2016) -- Having someone dear to you in your life who suffers from a chronic illness is life changing. As they battle their illness, you are typically by their side, fighting for them, being there during the toughest treatments. If the illness should take their lives, there is great sadness for the loss after a long journey, but you are surrounded by a community who offers sympathy and assistance.

Unless that chronic illness is addiction. And the death is because of an overdose.

“Until society accepts it as a disease, it will always be frowned upon about how (Ryan) died,” said Denise Williams. Her son Ryan Williams, a 29-year-old Northeast High School graduate, was waiting for paperwork to be squared away to start a recovery program for his heroin addiction. He told Denise, “I’m not going to make it.”

He died of an overdose a few days later. It was January 2015, the same month that Anne Arundel County Executive Steve Schuh declared the county’s heroin epidemic a “public health emergency.”

Three years earlier, Valerie Albee lost her 29-year-old daughter Mariah to a heroin overdose.

“I felt so alone. I didn’t feel secure in Severna Park. I felt people were judging,” Albee said. She now lives in Easton.

The guilt and shame that comes with death from substance abuse is one of the reasons why Susan Coale, Clinical Specialist in Bereavement at Chesapeake Life Center, created a grief support group for the loved ones left behind. A service program of Hospice of the Chesapeake, the center not only provides grief support to hospice families but also to the greater community suffering with loss of any kind. Though people like Williams and Albee could find some benefit from a traditional grief support group, they could gain so much more by sharing with people who have felt the stigma that is unique to losing someone to addiction.

The group was a lifesaver for Albee. She had been attending the child loss support group before Coale started the substance abuse loss support group aptly named Together... Silent No More. In that room once a month, those who feel trapped by the stigma that comes with the way their loved ones died are finally free to talk, unshackled by society's judgement.

"It's so comforting to know you're in a group of people who are sharing the same pain you're feeling," Albee said. And though, as she said, "it's a club nobody wants to join," she also said "it is a safe place where we can interact. Sometimes you can get comfort from another member, and sometimes you can give it."

"We all have so much anger," said Williams. Since participating in the group she said, "I can feel myself getting calmer."

Both women have found a new strength by attending the group, and have become vocal advocates so that substance abusers and their families get the help they need. Williams speaks at recovery homes around the area. Albee founded Mariah's Mission Fund which provides resources to organizations that support families who have lost loved ones to drugs and alcohol. Coale said it is typical for people who have lost a loved one to addiction to become activists.

"Activism is a way to make meaning, and meaning making is such an important part of healing," Coale said.

An important part of that meaning making is to redefine how the world sees their children. "(Ryan's) death has defined him as opposed to his life defining him. And it's not who he was."

Albee shared the sentiment. "I don't want drugs to define who Mariah was," she told the *Talbot Spy*. "These kids don't want to be drug addicts."

***Together ... Silent No More is a monthly drop-in support group that meets on the third Monday of the month in the evenings. For information, call Chesapeake Life Center at 888-501-7077 or visit [www.chesapeakelifecenter.org](http://www.chesapeakelifecenter.org).***

(more)



(March 21, 2016) Denise Williams holds a picture of her son, who passed away in January 2015. Photo by Elyzabeth Marcussen, Hospice of the Chesapeake



(March 21, 2016) Valerie Albee looks at a picture of her daughter, Mariah, who passed away in 2012. Photo by Elyzabeth Marcussen, Hospice of the Chesapeake

###

**Chesapeake Life Center**, a program service of **Hospice of the Chesapeake**, serves hospice family members and the community with bereavement services and activities aimed at enhancing the quality of life for those grieving the loss of a loved one. For more information on Chesapeake Life Center programs, call 410-987-2129 or visit [www.chesapeakelifecenter.org](http://www.chesapeakelifecenter.org).