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JUNE BUGS: RESILIENCE AND HOPE

June Bugs meant summer was really here. Sturdy little bodies cloaked in a hard armor shells, their dark emerald backs somewhat resembled larger rectangularly-cut gem stones. They were not pretty in the way of say, butterflies, but I found them fascinating and beautiful in their resilience. Green also happened to be my favorite color. They were also too easy to catch in their slumbering walk. They tickled the palm of my hand. Setting them free was sometimes harder as you had to be careful of their tiny strong claws clinging to your clothing – or worse, to your hair. It was as if once caught, they wanted to stay.

The boys in the neighborhood liked to tie one end of a string to a June Bug's leg and the other end to the banana bars on the back of their bicycles. The bugs were dragged behind as the boys raced up and down Calhoun Street. When the bikes stopped and the boys chattered, the June Bugs flew in large arching circles, finally trying to escape. My self-appointed role was to plead, demand, and when necessary, scrap with the boys to let the poor creatures go.

When they fell, as they always did, they flipped onto their backsides were trapped by their own bodies. You set them upright and back on their feet, and they might tumble over once more, and over and over again. In the summer morning light, you would find many of them on the porch having died from exhaustion in their nighttime compulsion to chase the artificial lights. But you also found some clinging to the window screens to live another day.

Beautiful though they were, their brief and hard lives were cycles of ups and downs, constantly struggling, but never really giving up until their bodies simply gave out. It is an imperfect analogy, but the cycle of opioid addiction is somewhat similar. Opioids take over so easily. Once caught in addiction, the cycle begins - flying endlessly in circles, getting knocked down over and over, sometimes breaking free for a while, continually struggling to overcome, being cutoff, and likely ending in a precipitously shorter life.

Addicts are so resilient on the one hand, and so helpless on the other. Their stories are everywhere. You don't have to search them out. I have become close with a single mother who works in building maintenance on the third shift, five nights a week. We have talked many times in the late hours over the past several years. Her eyes would light up describing her eight children, their frequent Sunday picnics in the mountains, her eldest daughter's wedding, the infrequent trips back home overseas.

Two months ago, she quietly said hello and went about her work. Something was clearly wrong. I asked if she was okay. She whispered "My son, he died." She told me of his opioid addiction. She had called police in the past when she found needles. She struggled to understand why they could not arrest him on that basis alone for his own safety. She told him he could no longer live in the house because of the younger children. He had stayed away until the week before when he asked if he could spend that night at home. She laid down for a short nap before work and woke suddenly 40 minutes later.

She found him in the bathroom, already gone. Neighbors heard her screams and came running. The police arrived. Her other children

saw everything until a friend led the young ones across the street to shield them from the flashing blue and red emergency lights, squawking radios, and solemn faces of those whose job was to perform the terrible job with professionalism and dignity. After his death, she found the multiple cell phones used for transactions with the messages coming in non-stop. She also found a shoebox full of scripture clippings and his letters to God begging for strength and apologizing for hurting his mother.

All that time, he had been trying for a way out. In overwhelming grief and rage, she has to carry on for her family. Two mothers cried hard in each other's arms as she shared her story – one experiencing a mother's worst nightmare, the other unable to fathom how she herself could go on if she were in the same shoes.

No one is immune from the threat. My family has stories, too. I have twenty-six first cousins. Despite many years of sobriety, the one closest to my age overdosed following his wife's death from cancer. He was the son of two physicians, musical, educated, and a brilliant professional chef with the most welcoming smile. He was not immune. His family left behind reeling was not immune.

When I spoke with Knoxville Police Department Sergeant Josh Shaffer about writing for DICTA, he told me of calls he had answered to assist addicted attorneys, including pulling an overdosing attorney out of a Lexus. He apologized for not being able to write his article earlier because he has been overwhelmed by deaths in the past few weeks. Judge Duane Slone has seen countless families in the throws of addiction. KBA member Sarah Booher shares the pain of losing a close friend. The stories are real, and they are our stories.

Sobriety is not a one-and-done. Even after numerous rehabilitation admissions, opioid addicts frequently live by the "only one more time" adage. That one time is often the last time for everything. Many come by their addiction honestly through treatment for real medical problems. Many make the choice recreationally. Their reasons are relevant for understanding and promoting prevention measures. But asking opioid addicts "Why," especially those in the latter category, is largely pointless. They are where they are and the associated stigma can be as crippling as the addiction itself.

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My intention in making the opioid epidemic a focus for this year is to help remove that stigma, which otherwise leads us to ignore the problem. Our communities suffer when we turn our backs. Perhaps a helpful question to ask is, "What can I do to help?" I do not pretend to know the answers. They may be as myriad as the individuals walking the earth. My own starting points are paying attention to what is happening,

not assuming the problem will never knock on our front door, educating myself, and sharing in others' grief.

Along with the fireflies rising from the ground at dusk, the buzz of the street lights warming up and the delicate whiffs of honeysuckle, despite their challenges, the resilient emerald green were still harbingers of the idyllic promise of summertime stretching out before me. They are reminders there is always hope. As individuals, we can join the necessary community response.