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T/E mom Leslie Holt finds purpose in her pain; Vexing vaccine news; Stoga grad's senseless shooting; Retail rumblings. Plus, a homegrown tea you gotta try and a must-see Haverford home, Sage advice and more

JANUARY 21, 2021 / BY CAROLINE O'HALLORAN / /

****CONTENT WARNING: This article contains graphic content and may be triggering for those with PTSD or victims of sexual violence.****

Two years ago, Leslie Holt had every reason to give up.

To curl up in a ball and blot out the world.

To stop caring.

She'd been fighting for her daughter for 15 years. And that all-consuming war – abruptly, devastatingly – had ended.

Leslie had lost. Lana was gone.

Assaulted in her early teens then tortured by Lyme Disease for half her life, Lana, 32, had recently turned to methadone to ease the pain. In November 2018, she'd opened her family's Tredyffrin mailbox expecting to retrieve a fresh supply.

Instead, she picked up poison – 100% pure 3-methyl fentanyl, an opioid analog exponentially more deadly than fentanyl.

Today, still engulfed by the kind of grief only a parent who buries a child can know, Leslie says “it’s a slog to get up every day.”

But somehow, she does, toiling at her desk long into the night.

There are, after all, other Lanas out there to fight for.

Leslie Holt remembers her daughter’s early years on Malvern’s Wisteria Drive as happy.

“Lana was the sweetest person. I’d get notes from her teachers about how she would help everyone. Her friends would tell me how she’d stick up for them if they were bullied on the bus. You could rely on her as a fighter, a little protector and the most loyal friend. She made the honor roll at T/E Middle School and had really great friends. It was a good time in her life. And then it wasn’t.”

Lana Holt (right) with her big brother Tim and friends Ashley and Brian Braxton in Ocean City, NJ.

Leslie says the trajectory of her daughter’s life – and, by extension, her own – changed forever on July 1, 2002, when Lana was 14. A 22-year-old neighbor, a trusted family friend who lived on the same street, got her drunk and raped her. She’d fallen asleep in her bed and awoke to the man forcing himself on her, taking her virginity and ejaculating on the wall above her head.

The next morning, she scrubbed the wall and buried her secret.

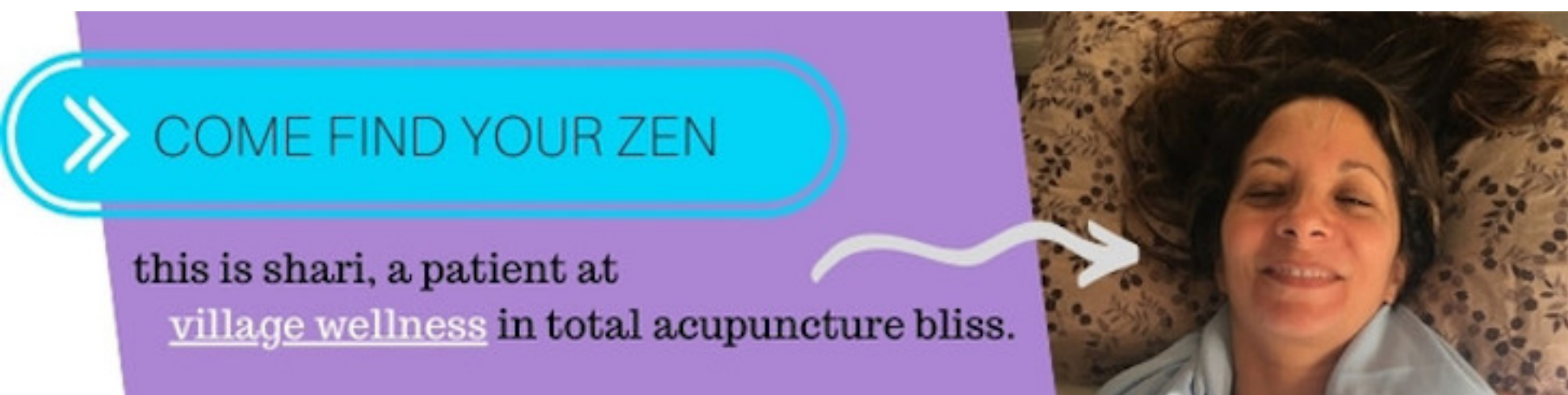
If she told her parents she’d been drinking, she might get in trouble. Maybe she’d even be blamed. How could she tell them the boy they’d long welcomed into their home, even brought along on family vacations, had grown up to become a monster?

Leslie didn’t find out about the rape until four years later, when the therapist from Lana’s

three-month stay at a Florida rehab finally told her.

By then, Lana's life had begun to unravel. After the assault, she'd started smoking and drinking. Her grades slipped at Stoga; her personality changed. Her mother remembers her as "isolating ... She was still sweet but a little scary."

Within a year or so, Lana began begging off school, complaining about blinding headaches and stomachaches so severe she couldn't stand up. Was she truly sick or just hung over? Her parents wondered. Searching for answers they consulted **Dr. Martin Mulders**, an integrative physician in Wayne, who started treating Lana for chronic, debilitating Lyme Disease. Mulders believed it had been festering for months, if not years.



Lana and her parents would spend the next 18 years consulting a string of doctors and healers, hoping to find someone, anyone, who could free Lana from the excruciating Lyme flare-ups that sometimes felt like the flu, sometimes left her crawling to the bathroom.

During her junior year at Conestoga, Lana's self-medicating with alcohol had become so concerning, her parents sent her to Caron Renaissance, a well-regarded rehab in Boca Raton. Her daughter's downward spiral was typical, Leslie learned. Lana's therapist at Caron told Leslie that 98 percent of young people she treated for substance abuse had experienced some form of sexual assault.

Forget nicotine or marijuana, "trauma is the real gateway drug," Leslie says.

Back from Florida, Lana absorbed another shock when her close friend from middle school, Chelsea Campbell, died from a heroin overdose.

“During that era at Conestoga [2003-2006], it wasn’t ‘Oh my God, did you go to rehab?’ It was more, ‘Where did you go to rehab?’ because so many kids were going at that time,” Leslie recalls.

Despite on-and-off crippling pain, Lana managed to graduate from Upattinas, an alternative high school in Glenmoore, and later from Harcum College with a vet tech degree.

Lana, Tim, Leslie and Tim Jr. celebrating Lana’s birthday at La Collina in Belmont Hills, a family tradition started when the Holts lived in Gladwyne.

Lana took jobs at Penn’s veterinary hospital in West Philly and then at Hope Veterinary Specialists in Malvern but Lyme kept dragging her down.

“She was taking aspirin constantly. Sometimes she would push through it. Sometimes she called in sick, knowing she didn’t have the strength to lift dogs on and off [treatment] tables.”

Lana with Wesley, a favorite pet-sitting client in 2016. An animal lover from an early age, Lana worked as a veterinary technician and took care of pets on the side.

Kaitlen Langerhans and Lana at the Berwyn Tavern circa 2008. Kaitlen remembers her friend’s welcoming smile, contagious laugh, and kindness “to all her crossed her path ... Whether it was a gas station clerk, her best friend or any animal she caught sight of, Lana cared with all her heart.”

In 2012, Lana suffered a third trauma when her best friend from Conestoga, Meghan McGuire, 25, died in a head-on car crash on Rte. 202.

Meanwhile, Leslie kept searching for doctors. After calling every day for two weeks, Leslie

brought Lana to Long Island to see renowned internist **Dr. Roger Mazlen**, who diagnosed Lana with myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome and prescribed herbs and supplements.

The Holts also turned to Devon pain specialist **Dr. Daniel Rubino**, who had other patients with chronic Lyme and “knew the torture she was living through,” according to Leslie.

Over time, Lana became so sick she stopped working altogether and Leslie moved in to her Chesterbrook condo to care for her.

Around this time, Leslie discovered that Lana had seen a post on a Lyme message board touting methadone as a miracle cure. When Leslie and Lana talked about it, Lana never mentioned she’d already decided to try it.

She found a dealer, someone she knew from her Stoga circle, and started using what she thought was methadone but, according to Leslie, may not have been. Several months later, not long after she moved home, she contacted a new dealer from Philly and texted him to arrange for a methadone delivery to her Malvern mailbox.

At 7:30 a.m. on Nov. 2, 2018, Tim Holt found his daughter slumped over at the foot of her bed, unconscious. Neither Tim nor the EMTs could bring her back.

Police tracked Lana’s poisoner through text messages on her phone. Posing as Lana, Tredyffrin Detective Rob Bostick texted the dealer and asked for another delivery. On the appointed day, Bostick sent Leslie and Tim to wait at the Malvern Panera and camped out near the Holts’ mailbox. The stakeout ended when Ricky Lowe, 25, pulled up in a Jaguar.

Last June, a Chester County judge sentenced Lowe to 14 to 32 years – the longest jail term in county history – for delivering a fatal drug overdose to Alanna Beth Holt.

Tim calls the verdict “satisfying but it didn’t give us any closure ... You buy a home in a place like Chester County, you raise your kids, you do the best you can and this happens.

You realize there are no boundaries. Lowe was selling 3-methyl fentanyl so pure it would have killed a horse and somehow Lana found him. She was incredibly intelligent ... I don't know how she didn't realize the risk."

Lana and Leslie Holt celebrating Leslie's birthday in her Malvern backyard. In later social media posts, Lana often referred to her mom as her best friend.

Leslie and Tim Holt are convinced Lana might be alive today if she had received quality, trauma-informed therapy in her early teens. If she had come forward after the rape, unafraid of stigma or shame, confident she'd be believed.

"She had untreated PTSD. It weakened her spirit, it weakened her body, and it affected her soul," says Leslie.

"Mental pain causes physical pain," adds Tim.

In the years before her daughter's death, Leslie had already laid the groundwork for what has become her life's work.

She'd started advocating for women who'd been raped and abused at the Crime Victims Center of Chester County. For years, she accompanied scared victims to court. Even with photos of their black eyes and heads bleeding so badly they needed to be hospitalized, guilty verdicts were hard to secure, especially if the victim had been drinking, Leslie says. Rapists and abusers were routinely getting away with their crimes.

Determined to do more to empower victims and alert communities to predators, Leslie co-founded **The RADAR Project** in 2016, a nonprofit Android app and website that lets victims drop pins on a **"Me Too" map** to show where they were assaulted and share their stories anonymously without shame or stigma.

Lana named the project and dropped the first pin.

The local section of The RADAR Project's worldwide Me Too Map. Lana Holt's pin is directly above the Rt. 202 marker.

Lana told her mom she wished she could have dropped her pin years earlier. Her attacker had gone on to assault other underage girls at drinking parties, she told her parents. If others in T/E had had the app, they might have known about this predator in their own backyard.

Since 2016, more than 300 women around the world have dropped pins on The RADAR Project, and Leslie stays in touch with many of them.

But the Holts were just getting started.

In the fall of 2018, the family started collecting coats for homeless women and children in Kensington. It was Lana's idea. She'd never forgotten the shivering women, many of them sexually abused and living on the streets, who'd approached her for money when she worked in West Philly. Some of Leslie's own coats had gone missing at the time. "I never said anything but I know Lana gave them away," she says.

After Lana's death, coats continued to pile up at the family's home and at Holt Motorsports, Tim's business in West Chester.

"We were still in shock and could have pulled the plug but Lana wouldn't have wanted that," Leslie says.

And so, six weeks after her death, Leslie and Tim drove to Kensington and handed out hundreds of puffy jackets to women and children. Leslie tied a "Love, Lana" on each so the women "would feel like someone was thinking of them." Tim calls that first trip "almost cosmic. It made us feel closer to her."

The Love, Lana Coat Drive is now an annual event. It was so successful this winter that a

second trip to Kensington is planned.

Leslie Holt with a homeless woman in Kensington after she received one of 375 coats distributed in the 2020 Love, Lana Coat Drive. The woman told Leslie she'd been raped and was headed to rehab.

With The RADAR Project and coat drives established, Leslie's days are currently consumed by her third passion, A Child's Light.

A nonprofit offshoot of RADAR started a year after Lana's death, A Child's Light pays for therapy for Chester County children who've been traumatized – by rape, by abusive parents, by homelessness or by hunger.

Leslie says it's crucial to get kids with PTSD into counseling pronto, particularly sexually abused kids.

“Those are the kids who end up just like Lana, looking for relief, drinking, smoking pot, angry, unable to manage their emotions. Some become isolated, others become really aggressive – it manifests in different ways. They're the ones who become school shooters ... If kids don't get quality mental health care – many families can't afford it – they're sunk. They end up on disability, then on public assistance. If they had had counseling, we'd pay less in the long run.”

Leslie gets referrals from schools and social service agencies and says she can connect kids to quality, trauma-informed therapists within a week. “If it's not a good match, we switch them. These kids can't wait.”

Among the children she's helped: a 7-year old boy who was beaten by his father as a toddler and a 14-year-old girl who was sexually assaulted from age 5. Both are thriving and tell Leslie they actually enjoy their sessions. “It makes them feel like they have a voice, that an adult believes them and supports them.”

As program director for A Child's Light, Leslie raises money, writes grant proposals, speaks to civic groups, and personally connects kids to counselors.

The work fills her days but doesn't fill the hole in her heart.

"Leslie feels like she lost a limb," Tim says. "She's doing incredible work; this is how she's dealing with it."

"I don't have the emotion of joy anymore. That's gone," Leslie says. "From the moment I wake up until I finally fall asleep, there's a scream that sits in the middle of my chest. I push it down, I try to ignore it working on A Child's Light so no other child or parent has to experience loss. I know it can't bring Lana back, but it definitely helps."

To support The Radar Project or A Child's Light, visit www.theradarproject.org or email achildsight1@gmail.com. Donations to the Love, Lana Coat Drive can be dropped off at Holt Motorsports, 1315 West Chester Pike, West Chester.



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