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'A bright light trapped in a dark room'

Sasha Menu Courey suffered from borderline personality disorder, an illness that eventually took her life. Her parents say she couldn't get the treatment she needed quickly enough in Canada.

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Lynn Courey, with 19-year-old daughter Kayla, recounts the life of her 20-year-old daughter Sasha, a competitive swimmer, Olympic hopeful and straight-A student, whose battle with borderline personality disorder ended in tragedy when she took her own life.

By: Alison Cross Staff Reporter, Published on Tue Aug 09 2011

Sasha Menu Courey had a disease that wrenched away her will to live.

On June 17, two days after deliberately ingesting a bottle of over-the-counter painkillers, she died.

A talented swimmer on an athletic scholarship at the University of Missouri, the exuberant 20-year-old from Etobicoke got good grades. Her parents were loving and involved.

She was fluent in French and spoke a smattering of Spanish.

But Menu Courey had borderline personality disorder, a disease that plagued her with extreme emotions and caused erratic behaviour.

"She was like a very bright light trapped in a dark room . . . there was a sadness in her," said Menu Courey's mother, Lynn. "It's hard to understand that she's not coming back."

As Lynn, Mike, her father, and Kayla, her younger sister, sat in their living room watching a slide show of Menu Courey, they described a vivacious young woman who couldn't get the proper medical treatment she needed in Canada, and their drive to prevent this from happening to other families.

"I believe that if Sasha had been able to get treatment here she would still be alive today," Lynn said. "She wanted to be a humanitarian worker . . . she really wanted to make a difference for people who suffered."

The family's story comes amid calls from Ontario health organizations that mental illness be given priority in the upcoming provincial election. Twenty per cent of Ontarians will experience some kind of mental illness in their lifetime, according to the Ontario Mental Health and Addictions Alliance.

Menu Courey struggled with intense emotions in high school, but was never diagnosed, despite a suicide attempt at 14.

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She called her parents from school in March to say her world was starting to collapse. She injured her back and had to stop swimming, jeopardizing her spot on the team. She had split up with her boyfriend and been in a car accident.

"Swimming was her lifeline," Lynn said. "You let go of your emotion (while swimming). You clear your mind . . . all of these things, (they were) like a perfect storm for someone with (borderline personality disorder)."

Menu Courey ended up spending time in a psychiatric ward in Kansas City, where she was given an official diagnosis. But she didn't get better.

Shortly after being released she tried to kill herself again.

After the second attempt, the family called the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) in Toronto, hoping to get their daughter into an in-patient program for BPD sufferers that involves intensive psychotherapy.

They were told it could take as long as a year to get Menu Courey a bed.

When Lynn called about outpatient programs that used Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), she heard voicemail messages saying to call back in a month to see if the waiting list had opened.

"My kid wants to kill herself and you want me to call back in a month?" said Lynn, who added she stopped sleeping, afraid she would wake up to be informed her daughter had died.

They eventually found a DBT program at McLean Hospital, a private facility outside Boston. It cost \$44,000 for 28 days and a bed was available in a week.

They signed up and Menu Courey spent two months there.

CAMH doesn't comment on specific cases, but Shelley McMMain, head of the Borderline Personality Clinic, said wait times vary depending on the person.

Families in crisis can also access CAMH's 24-hour emergency department, McMMain said.

"The good news is that we have effective treatments for (borderline personality) disorder . . . but the big problem we face is that effective treatments aren't widely available. That's a problem realized not only in Canada but also internationally," she said.

Menu Courey's condition improved at McLean, and she and her parents discussed the possibility of her coming home to Toronto to continue treatment with private therapists. It was too expensive for her to stay in Boston.

But she felt like she couldn't bear the move home, Lynn said.

She swallowed at least 100 pills and after being rushed to hospital the next morning, floated in and out of consciousness for two days. She told her parents then that she was ready to come to Toronto.

She never made it home.

"There needs to be more awareness about this disease," Mike said. "We didn't know how to help her."

The Menu Courey family has started a fund through Mt. Sinai Hospital to raise money that might one day help educate the public about the disorder and increase access to treatment.

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