

Lauren Renee Cole

This is the story of [Lauren Renee Cole](#). From a very young age, she had a unique ability to make everyone around her feel special. She listened to what people were saying instead of listening to respond. Her personality was pure and genuine; she was never uncomfortable being herself and making everyone else feel safe to be themselves. Lauren was the definition of the girl next door. A person who was approachable and dependable, and everyone saw her as their best friend.

She was also a fierce competitor, ambitious with a strong will to be the best. There were no boundaries; she would push herself to the limit to achieve her goals. The little girl behind a competitive athlete was swimming at age two, tumbling at three, and skiing by four. She played basketball, softball, soccer, travel soccer, little league cheerleading, and dance. By middle school, she was selected as MVP at cheerleading competitions and captain of her squad. She was on two competition cheer squads in high school, captain of her school's cheerleading squad and lacrosse team. She was one of only three people in school history to score over 100 goals in lacrosse. In college, she represented West Virginia University at the National Cheerleaders Association Collegiate Cheer Nationals in Daytona, FL, two years in a row. Everything Lauren did looked effortless.

After completing her bachelor's degree in social work, she worked with foster care and recovering addicts while pursuing her master's degree in Social Work. She had a true helper's heart. Her sole purpose in life was to assist others in need and make life easier for anyone struggling. Actively helped the homeless and took shoes to them. One time she gave away her clothes to a college girl who had been bullied. Lauren would give the shirt off her back. She was very generous to total strangers. After the 2019 Christmas break at WVU, Lauren's classmate commented on how nice she looked in a new coat. Lauren told the classmate to try it on, then proceeded to say to the classmate she looked better in it and gave the coat to her.

Most people would describe her as someone who never met a stranger, caring, thoughtful and empathetic. She always tried to give people what they needed as a friend. The perfect combination of light-heartedness and sincerity. If someone was hurting and in pain, she knew how to be funny yet serious enough to listen sincerely and comfort them. Countless students at her high school had come forward to tell stories about her speaking to them on a day they were considering suicide or standing up for them when they were treated poorly by other students. Not only was she her sister's best friend but a friend to people who had no one.

This life story sounds like a girl who had it all. A girl that was happy and content. She was beautiful, intelligent, funny, athletic, well-liked by her friends, and loved deeply by her family. Lauren loved family gatherings and yearly family vacations. She had the support of her father, mother, brother, sister, Pap & Gram, and extended family. She grew up next door to her grandparents, spending many nights with them. She loved to hunt and fish with her dad and pap. Every deer season, she stayed at her grandfather's farm the week of Thanksgiving, surrounded by family. She appeared not to have a care in the world.

However, Lauren had been facing an epic battle since she was 16 and experimented with opiates one evening with her boyfriend and a few friends. She had a bright future and did not plan to be an addict. She once said she thought it was recreational, like marijuana. There was no education on this topic. She

was embarrassed and fought this disease alone for two years while maintaining good grades, excelling in sports, and taking college courses while in high school. She kept this secret from her family, teachers, coaches, and friends. Towards the end of her first semester of college, she had to swallow her pride and ask her parents for help. They immediately sent her to a prestigious rehab facility and committed to helping her recover. They were willing to try every option available.

Unfortunately, the world moves very fast, and recovery is slow. It was exhausting for Lauren to fight for her life every second of every day. Opioid Use Disorder (OUD) is a chronic disease that changes the brain. It causes the brain to release such high levels of dopamine it is extremely difficult to quit. The brain begins to require these higher-than-normal levels of dopamine. Most successful recovering opioid users need a combination of prescription medication, counseling, and a strong support system. Lauren had all of these available and worked very hard to stay clean.

Nevertheless, she remained hopeful when she relapsed after a recovery attempt. Recovery is an ongoing process of change. Relapse is expected to happen. It's a long-term process that can take years. Lauren was in it for the long haul. She had a lot to live for. She was constantly making good choices about what she wanted her life to be. After all, she was working on her master's degree in Social Work and knew she could make a difference in the world. She was seizing opportunities to make a great career in a field of work she was very passionate about. Approximately three weeks before Lauren relapsed, she came home to talk to me. She said, "dad, there are so many people suffering from addiction that need and want help, but they don't have the resources or family to get it." "Do you think that when you retire, we can do something to help them?"

After a ten-year battle with opiate addiction, On July 5, 2020, Lauren learned that her gym workout partner had tested positive for COVID -19. This meant that Lauren had to self-quarantine until she could be tested. She could not work, could not go to the gym, could not volunteer, and could not visit family or friends. She contacted me (dad), asking me to find a COVID test ASAP. Unfortunately, there was none to be found until Thursday, July 9. I texted and called Lauren all morning and mid-afternoon and could not reach her. Finally, I left work to go to her apartment to tell her I had located COVID tests. I saw her slumped over in her car when I pulled into her parking lot.

I immediately called 911 and rushed over and pulled her out. I tried to resuscitate her, but I was too late. After the paramedics took her, I went home to tell my wife, son, and daughter that Lauren had passed. I then had to walk across the street and tell her grandparents, who were celebrating their 60th anniversary that day. Lauren's slip-up took away her chance to live up to her full potential. It was a sunny afternoon on July 9, 2020; she died of fentanyl poisoning at the age of 26. She was alone in her car, hiding from the stigma of addiction. Her ability to recover was stolen by a drug she didn't knowingly purchase. She was deceived by someone that didn't care. Parents should have the opportunity to hold and kiss their children when they enter this world; they should not have to hold and kiss them when they leave this world. I did. Over 800 people paid their respects to her family at the funeral home and told her parents that she was their best friend.

Lauren did not overdose on July 9, 2020; she was poisoned.

Lauren's Wish was created to carry out issues that were important to Lauren.

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." – Reinhold Niebuhr