

Talking About Cannabis founder Debra Bell

Debra Bell founded Talking About Cannabis after her son William's addiction to skunk devastated her family. A freelance journalist, Debra, 49, lives in South London with her husband, Guy, a criminal barrister, and their two other sons, Jack, 18, and Alex, 14. William, now 20, is currently estranged from his parents.

As a young boy, William gave no indication that he would be trouble. Sporty, engaging, clever, he was also stunningly good-looking – tall with big blue eyes. He did well at his school, Dulwich College, becoming captain of the football team, and he was part of a happy, loving family with a home in a peaceful, leafy suburb. You'd have thought that his future was assured.

At 14, however, he suddenly became sullen and withdrawn. We were worried but put it down to normal teenage behaviour. Then we found the cigarette papers and tobacco in his bedroom. 'It's just cannabis, it's no big deal,' he told us. 'Everyone my age at school is doing it.'

At the time, the government was talking about downgrading cannabis from a Class B to a Class C drug and as far as William was concerned, we didn't know what we were talking about. He later told me he got his skunk from a boy he sat next to in Latin.

As he entered his GCSE year, the changes in him were tangible. He became revolting and smelly, with greasy hair and hollow circles under his eyes. He began truanting and when we challenged him, he would square up to me and be frighteningly aggressive. We took away his allowance and privileges. Then DVDs, jewellery and cash went missing.

He passed his GCSEs, but then announced he was leaving school and going to the local sixth-form college. He rarely turned up there and later dropped out. The following summer, we went on holiday without him and while we were away, he moved large numbers of his friends into the house. We came back to a filthy home, with condoms and evidence of drug use in the bedrooms. I was virtually hysterical – it was a breaking point for us as a family.

When he was 17 he went to live in a flat we funded. We hoped that being independent would make him happier, but it only accelerated his descent into addiction. He was diagnosed with cannabis-induced psychosis and we spent £7,000 on treatment at the Priory, but as soon as he came out, he was back on the skunk. As a family, we have had therapy ourselves to help us get through. William did see one therapist with us, although often he wouldn't turn up and when he did he would be raging.

A happy pre-addiction portrait of Debra's son William, left, with brothers Jack and Alex

We had to pay for the therapy, but I considered it a necessity. There is a lot of talk about helping addicts, but behind every addict is a family and the NHS provides no effective support for them. Our marriage was falling apart under the strain, but the truth is that neither of us was to blame for what happened to William – it was the drugs.

One thing I am pretty sure of is that neither Jack nor Alex will ever do drugs. They have seen the pain they cause.

During the ongoing battles with William, we used to have family conferences, where I would talk about new beginnings. And I remember Jack asking at one of them: 'How many new beginnings are we going to have, Mum?' They lost patience with William long before I did.

Talking About Cannabis started as my online diary, to help me make sense of what we were going through. When a newspaper wrote about the diary and I had a thousand website hits within a few hours, I knew I had touched a nerve. Other parents wrote their stories and we now have almost 500 posted on the TAC site. We are lobbying the government to put in place the 'massive health education campaign' it promised and we are also setting up a 24-hour helpline for families.

William was outraged when I first went public. But we are like a mirror reflecting back his truth, and the glare is now so great he can't ignore it. A few months ago he wrote his story, which is now on the website. He acknowledges the extreme effects of skunk and the silent damage it is causing to our society. He says he wants to help my work, but feels most strongly that real progress in preventing young people smoking skunk can only come from other young people like him. He's right – he has a huge part to play in raising awareness.

I last saw William eight months ago. He told me that he was living in South London and working in a pub. It's plausible, but I can't know for sure. He appears to be making some progress – at least, I really hope he is – but his life is still effectively on hold. All he has is a set of indifferent GCSEs when in fact he could be at university, preparing to become a useful and profitable member of society. That's why we have to get the truth of cannabis out there – to prevent what has happened to our son happening to other children.

Sharon Shearer's son Scott, 21, is currently in a psychiatric hospital being treated for the psychotic affects of skunk addiction. Sharon, 55, is divorced from Scott's father John, a drummer who played with former Genesis guitarist Steve Hackett. She lives in Cheshunt, Hertfordshire.

I visit Scott in hospital, and I know that somewhere inside his mind is the boy I knew – the boy who was funny, clever and gorgeous.

Before he went into hospital in February, he was unwashed and unshaven, he didn't clean his teeth and had food all down the front of his clothes. There were occasional flashes of the old Scott, but, mostly, he was unrecognisable.

Scott was never easy. He was diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder when he was nine, and his behaviour was always on the wild side.

At school he was the class clown – incredibly popular with his peers because he'd try anything. It was just the two of us at home – his father and I divorced when Scott was ten – and I had no idea how desperately out-of-control he was about to become.

Between the ages of 12 and 14, he was drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes and dope with friends in the park. Then at 15, he started not bothering to get up. He became aggressive and reclusive. I discovered he was smoking skunk in his bedroom. When I told him to stop, he would say, 'F*** you.'

By 17, all he could think about was buying more skunk and smoking it. His girlfriend left him and went to Australia. His whole world collapsed then, and he had the first of many stays in hospital. Throughout, I have felt incredibly isolated.

People stop phoning you; they don't know what to say. If they have children themselves, they are worried that what you are going through will rub off on them. I don't blame them but I do blame myself. I wish I had been stricter; I feel guilty for splitting up with his dad and for not being able to rescue him. I've spent tens of thousands of pounds on his rehab treatment. I no longer own my home – I sold it to pay off debts.

I came across Talking About Cannabis when I searched for help online. Everywhere else I had been, cannabis had been dismissed as 'only dope'. But we mothers who have lived with the consequences know that it destroys lives. It was such a relief to find that other mothers had encountered the same anguish and frustrations.

Today, Scott is getting better, he looks better, he is more aware, he realises he has a problem and knows it will be difficult to overcome. He will never be the same again. I don't know what will become of us, but at least, through working with TAC, I can offer support to others.

Sue Hansen's eldest son Eric, 26, has spent much of this year in prison for assault and jumping bail. He first used cannabis at the age of 12 and has a long, complex history of drug addiction. Sue, 56, and her property developer husband Peter, also 56, have three other children. They live in London.

We are a noisy, busy family and Eric was always a voluble part of that. He was happy-go-lucky, slightly naughty, but with an innocent charm that helped him to get away with it.

In his teens, he became argumentative and mildly rebellious. We sent him to boarding school, hoping a structured, supportive environment would help. But he didn't get the support, and we didn't spot the signs.

Cannabis was his gateway drug, but by 15 he was also using cocaine and drinking alcohol. At home, he became aggressive and agitated and sometimes violent – particularly towards his father.

He did badly in his GCSEs and moved back home to retake them at a college. Slowly, insidiously, the manipulative behaviour induced by his drug-taking plunged our family into chaos.

Sunglasses and jewellery started to go missing. I would go to my purse and think: 'I'm sure I had more cash than this.' Eric had odd jobs in the building trade, but none lasted.

Since the age of 19 he has had several bouts of drug- and alcohol-induced psychosis. He once pinned me against the wall while holding a hammer. It wasn't a frenzied attack – that was the scary thing. When I looked into his eyes, he just wasn't there. Peter managed to take the hammer from him – and Eric ran into the garden, took off his clothes and rubbed dirt over his body.

He has been sectioned twice. The second time, he spent ten weeks in a psychiatric hospital before being placed in a warden-controlled house. But within three months he was back on drugs. Drugs stunt your mental growth – he's 26, but he thinks like a 15-year-old. In that sense, he has been the best anti-drugs campaigner for our other children. None has touched drugs, and, thankfully, they are all getting on with their lives.

We first put Eric into a bedsit around six years ago when we could no longer cope with him living with us. He has been back and forth since, but last year, after he smashed up our house, we couldn't take any more. We sold up and moved away without telling him where we were going.

We were introduced to Talking About Cannabis through a friend, and you soon realise that you are not alone. Everyone here is a loving parent. Most had to make the 'tough love' decision to turn their backs on the children that they love. We love our son, but we can't live with what the drugs have done to him.

Literacy lecturer Domenica Napier has three daughters, Sophie, 24, Lizzie, 23, and Flora, 16. Sophie and Flora have been severely affected by drug abuse. Domenica, 53, lives in London with her property developer husband Michael, 58.

Sophie started smoking cannabis at 14. Until then, she had been a bright, affectionate, bubbly girl. Her old secondary school closed in her third year, she didn't settle in at her new school and that was the start of it. She began truanting – sneaking back home once I had gone to work in the morning. When we realised how unhappy she was, we moved her to a private school. There, she befriended a girl who was already smoking dope and I later discovered that they spent most of their time skipping lessons and shoplifting. My family has a history of bipolar disorder and at 16, Sophie had her first bipolar attack. I am convinced it was triggered by skunk.

Her sister Lizzie is also bipolar, but has always taken her prescribed medication and is very anti recreational drugs. Apart from one extreme bipolar episode, she has managed to lead a normal life and has just finished university.

Sophie, in contrast, has become so dangerously manic she has had to be sectioned in a psychiatric hospital ten times. Once, she tried to strangle me; another time, she began throwing knives because she was hallucinating and thought she was a magician. We have had to call the police several times to restrain her when she is out of control.

Two years ago, our youngest daughter Flora was caught at school with cannabis on her and expelled. Sophie had been passing joints around and I am pretty sure that is how Flora got started. She moved on to ecstasy and ended up taking a massive overdose of ecstasy and ketamine (a mind-altering tranquilliser), which made her spaced out, paranoid and set her heart racing.

We had to rush her to hospital, where they monitored her overnight. After that we managed to get her into a rehabilitation centre, where she spent five weeks undergoing psychiatric treatment at a cost to us of £25,000. She's now drug-free, although she is taking Prozac for depression.

Domenica's eldest daughter Sophie

For Sophie, there is no light at the end of the tunnel yet. When she is stable, she lives with her boyfriend, who is also a cannabis user, in a council house. They stay in bed all day, getting up about 4pm. Skunk has sapped all her energy. She's wasting her life and it breaks my heart, which is why support from other parents has been so important.

I attended a family group at Flora's rehab centre, but most people there were related to heroin addicts. On the Talking About Cannabis website, I was able to read the first-hand stories of mothers like me. Some of those stories are even more horrendous than mine.

Cannabis is not a harmless bit of fun. Skunk and teenagers are a poisonous combination. Finally, we are getting that message across. And even though it may be too late for Sophie, that is some small comfort to me.