



Dan as a newborn with Fiona and Tim, and as a schoolboy



# *We still miss Dan* **EVERY DAY'**

A decade on from losing her son to a drug overdose, Fiona Spargo-Mabbs shares how she's honouring his legacy

**F**unny, bright, curious and kind, my son Dan, 16, was excelling in sixth form. He performed in school productions, was voted Prom King and runner-up as Most Likely to Become Prime Minister. Outside of school, he was seeing his friends and girlfriend, learning the guitar, reading widely, attending church and helping older people in the community with gardening and errands.

He came home from school one Friday in January 2014 and asked to go to a party that evening. After the usual discussion about where he was going and with who and how to stay safe, my husband Tim and I allowed him to go. As the party was finishing late, we settled on 3am as his time to be home. We'd

discussed the dangers of drugs many times, so I felt sure he'd be careful. 'I love you, Mum, I promise I won't die,' he said jokingly as he hugged me goodbye.

That night, I had broken sleep trying not to worry about Dan – we had never agreed such a late curfew for him before. When I woke at 5am and found his bed still empty, my stomach dropped. I tried his phone a few times, but he didn't answer. I told myself that the party had run over, his phone was out of charge and he was staying at a friend's. I thought about calling the police, but what would I say? My son, who was almost 17, was a couple of hours late home? I tried to distract myself by marking work for my class (I was a teacher

at the time), but I couldn't concentrate. When I heard a car pull up outside, I felt instant relief. But when I opened the front door, I was met by a police officer.

When children are late home, parents

sometimes start imagining police coming to the door with bad news, but you never really believe it will happen. It felt like I was in a nightmare when I heard the words, 'Are you the parents of Daniel Spargo-Mabbs?' The officer told Tim and me that Dan had taken MDMA – also

known as Ecstasy – in powder form at an illegal rave. He'd reacted badly and had suffered three massive heart attacks before collapsing and being taken to hospital, where he was in intensive care.

**'As his life support was turned off, I held on to his face'**

I went into a total panic, while Tim managed to stay calm enough to drive us there. When we were let in to see Dan, I ran over to his unconscious body. 'Why did you do this?' I said, choked. After an agonising wait, a consultant came to tell us that Dan's organs were shutting down. I knew then he might not make it, but I tried desperately to cling on to hope.

Dan died three days later. As his life support was turned off, I held on to his face. I couldn't let go, knowing that when I did, it would go cold and Dan would really be gone. Eventually, Tim had to pull me away.

I couldn't understand that Dan had been here – and now he wasn't. I couldn't process any information. I was desperately trying to make sense of something that just didn't make sense.

## Positive action

We relived the trauma constantly – every time reporters were on our doorstep, or we had to work alongside the police as they investigated the events of the evening. Dan's brother Jacob, then 18, was devastated. They were so close – it had always been Jacob and Dan. His grief made continuing at university difficult and he had to take time out.

As a family, we knew we had to do everything we could to stop anything remotely like it happening to anyone else. So, eight days after Dan died, we registered the DSM Foundation as a

drug education charity. On the suggestion of Dan's drama teacher, we commissioned a play by Mark Wheeler as a powerful method of drug education. Titled *I Love You, Mum – I promise I Won't Die*, those awful, poignant words that were the last Dan ever said to me, the play has been performed across the world, often in secondary schools. It's also a GCSE drama set text, which Dan would have loved.

## 'Every young person in the UK should receive drugs education'

I work full-time running the charity, delivering sessions in schools and online alongside our drug education team. I also do policy work with government bodies and social media platforms. During lockdown, I wrote a book, *I Wish I'd Known*, as a guide for adults and carers about young people, drugs and decision making.

Over a decade on from losing Dan, days that are supposed to be happy, like Christmas and Mother's Day, are always tinged with sadness. The anniversary of his death and his birthday are particularly difficult, so we tend to hide away as a family and do things together that Dan enjoyed, like putting on a silly film and eating his favourite foods.

The 10-year anniversary of Dan's death felt very significant. I still can't accept that this awful situation is real. I can't move on – the best I can do is find ways to keep going. I'm much stronger now than I was during the first few years when I felt sick and unable to eat much of the time. I can cope better now than I used to when people moan about their

## DISCUSSING DRUGS

**DO** ✦ Take opportunities to talk about drugs with young people, and make conversations as comfortable as you can on both sides.

✦ Keep communication open.  
✦ Establish a clear set of values and boundaries, such as being clear on what your 'house rules' are and what you will and won't accept – studies show that this can reduce risk.

**DON'T** ✦ Feel you must be an expert before you have a conversation about drugs.

✦ Make it a long conversation – little and often is more effective.  
✦ Miss opportunities to discuss drugs when the subject is raised, such as when someone's taking a drug on TV, or if there's something drugs related in the news.

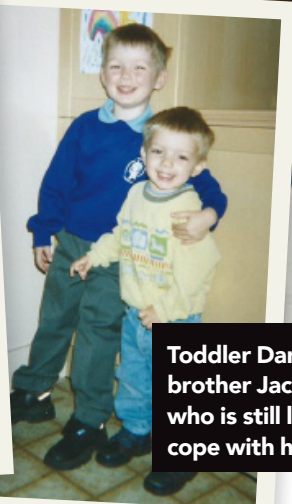
children, but it still hurts – it's another reminder that Dan is no longer here.

I'm incredibly proud of Jacob, now 29, who is such a kind and lovely person. He completed his degree, but his graduation day was bittersweet. His wedding day even more so, as Dan would have been best man. Instead, there was a big hole.

We hope the boy who sold Dan the MDMA is leading a fulfilling life

after serving his five-year prison sentence, so something good comes from something so awful. We can't bring Dan back, but we can do everything we can for other young people and their families. Our vision is to provide drug education for every young person in the UK. We miss Dan every day, but he will always be at the heart of everything we do.

✦ To find out more about the Daniel Spargo-Mabbs (DSM) foundation, visit [dsmfoundation.org.uk](http://dsmfoundation.org.uk)



Toddler Dan and his big brother Jacob, and Fiona, who is still learning to cope with her loss

