

**Testimony of April J. Rovero, Founder/President**  
**National Coalition Against Prescription Drug Abuse, San Ramon, CA**  
**before the**  
**Subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing, and Trade**  
**Committee on Energy and Commerce**  
**United States House of Representatives**  
**“Warning: The Growing Danger of Prescription Drug Diversion”**  
**April 14, 2011**

Chairman Bono Mack, Ranking Member Butterfield, and Members of the Subcommittee:

On December 18, 2009, my husband and I received the devastating and inconceivable news from a Detective with the Tempe, AZ Police Department that our youngest son, Joseph John Rovero, III (Joey), had been found dead by friends in his apartment off campus near Arizona State University (ASU), where he was attending college. Over the next few days, as we worked to get his body returned home to California, and funeral arrangements made so we could bury him the day after Christmas, a story began to unfold that we were completely stunned by.

We learned that Joey had been invited by two other ASU students to travel with them on a six hour road trip from Arizona to Rowland Heights, California on December 9, 2009, to visit Dr. Lisa Tseng, a licensed and practicing Osteopathic doctor. All three students walked into her office together after their 6 hour drive and all walked out a short time later with prescriptions in hand. Joey’s prescriptions included ninety 30mg. tablets of Roxicodone, ninety 350 mg. tablets of Soma and thirty 2 mg. tablets of Xanax. He and his “friends” were told by Tseng that they had to fill their prescriptions at Pacifica Pharmacy, which was about 35 miles from her office. They drove there together and all of them had their prescriptions filled with no questions asked. We’ve since learned that both the doctor and pharmacy had been under investigation by the DEA for at least 2 ½ years before Joey died.

Joey had never been previously treated for any of the conditions that were cited in Dr. Tseng’s medical record as the basis for what she prescribed for him that day. There was no indication in her records that she counseled Joey about how dangerous these medications can be if they are misused or abused, especially with alcohol. Joey died just nine days after his visit to Dr. Tseng. After partying with his college friends into the early hours of the morning, Joey went to sleep and never woke up.

The Coroner’s report indicated that he died from low levels of Xanax and moderate levels of Roxicodone, combined with an alcohol level of .013. The report stated that Joey “died from the

combined toxic effects of multiple drugs, including Ethanol, Oxycondone and Alprazolam. None of the drugs was present at a concentration that would have been individually lethal. However, each of the drugs has central nervous system depressant effects that would have been additive when taken together. There is no indication that the decedent intended to die on this occasion when he took the drugs in combination. Therefore, the manner of death will be classified as accident". The medications prescribed by Dr. Lisa Tseng proved to be a lethal weapon for Joey.

Joey had been due home for Winter break the day after he died, and the Christmas we expected to share with him never happened. Instead, we somehow managed to get through the most awful week of our lives. Stunned, shocked and grieving, we picked out a gravesite, coffin and clothes for Joey to be buried in. An obituary had to be written for a young man who had not had time to develop the lifetime achievements we should have been able to cite. Through it all we struggled to understand how this could have happened to Joey - how our perfectly normal family could have been dealt such a blow.

There are really no words that can adequately describe what my husband, Joey's brother and all of the other members of our family have experienced with Joey's death. He was my husband's only biological child, and his brother is now left with no sibling. As his mother, I truly feel as though a piece of me has been ripped away - forever. Our lives were irrevocably changed the night that we learned Joey had died. I can't believe any of us will ever fully recover from this tragedy that was so senseless and completely avoidable.

Joey was not a troubled young man - far from it. He was a senior at ASU and was just 5 months from graduating. He was a gifted athlete and a good student, even making the Dean's List at ASU in the Fall of 2008, his GPA over 3.5 that semester. He worked every summer and during every school break. He had a loving and caring relationship with all of his family members. Joey was extremely popular and he had friends all over the country who all seemed to feel as though he was their best friend. He was the one they went to for advise and counsel, and was known for being completely honest and non-judgmental. Over 200 of those friends attended his funeral, many of them missing Christmas with their families to travel from long distances to be with us that day. Joey's death has significantly impacted their lives, too.

Unfortunately, tragedy struck once again nine months to the day of Joey's death when one of his two college roommates shot and killed himself in front of his girlfriend after a heavy night of drinking and prescription drug abuse. This young man had struggled immensely with Joey's death and his own addiction to Xanax and Oxycodone. Joey and John are just two of six ASU students who have died from prescription drug-related causes this past year - all bright young men with very promising lives

ahead of them who are now gone forever. Every single week I learn about more deaths from prescription drug abuse, and each one is another dagger to my heart. In Florida alone, we lose seven people a day from overdoses and over 32,000 people a year die of adverse reactions to medications. Something simply must be done to end this epidemic.

It's extremely important to me that I do whatever I can to help other families avoid the devastation mine has experienced. Since Joey's death, I've worked hard to educate myself about the prescription drug abuse/misuse epidemic and all of the various aspects and contributors to it. It became quickly obvious to me that there is a general lack of awareness about how dangerous these drugs can be. Most people assume that they are safer than illicit drugs because a doctor prescribes them, but it's imperative that we spread the word that they simply aren't.

Determining that education could help reduce the death and addiction toll from prescription drugs, my family founded the National Coalition Against Prescription Drug Abuse (NCAPDA) in March, 2010. NCAPDA's primary focus is to increase public awareness and to stimulate and support legislative action that can reduce deaths and addiction due to prescription drugs.

Losing a child is the very worst nightmare a parent can experience. No one can possibly fully understand how impacting it is unless you've experienced it yourself. Not only do you find it terribly painful to recount all the wonderful years you had with them, you lament the "what ifs" and "should have beens" that you'll never experience with them. What career would they have developed after college graduation; who would they have married? What about those precious unborn grandchildren - what would they have looked like and what mark would they have made in this world? You worry about what will happen to you when you grow old. Who will be there who you can trust to be your advocate as your health fails and you need the support you thought would be there for you? You have to come to terms with the awful truth that you will have to live the rest of your life with a piece of your own life's puzzle missing.

No parent should ever have to live this new life my husband and I are now forced to endure, without the beautiful son we created together. I'm doing all I can to help others avoid what we've experienced by sharing Joey's story with students, parents, educators, medical professionals, community leaders and legislators throughout the country. Prescription drug abuse has become a multi-faceted epidemic that is going to take all of us to tackle. We've got to take action now to stem the tide of death, crime and addiction that has left no American community unaffected.

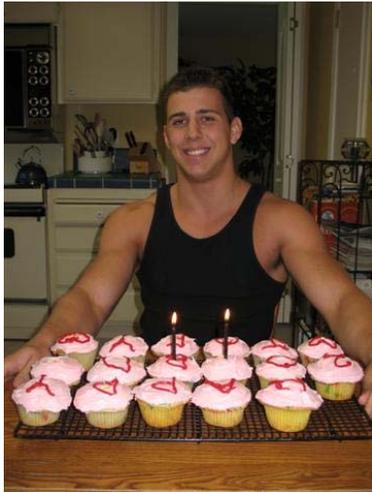
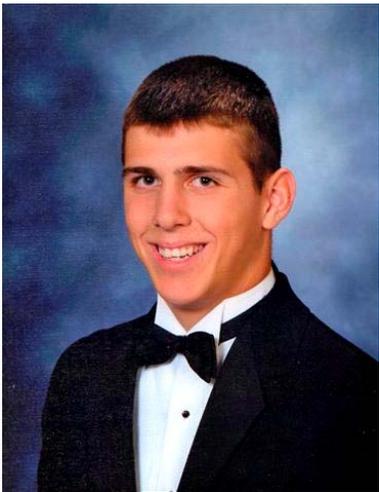
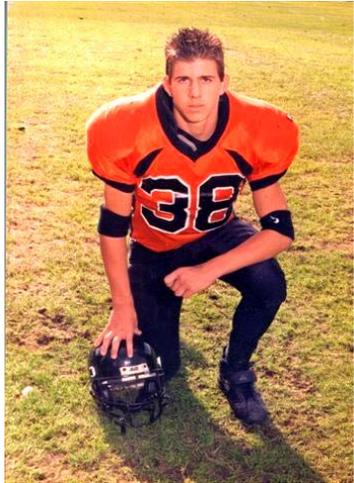
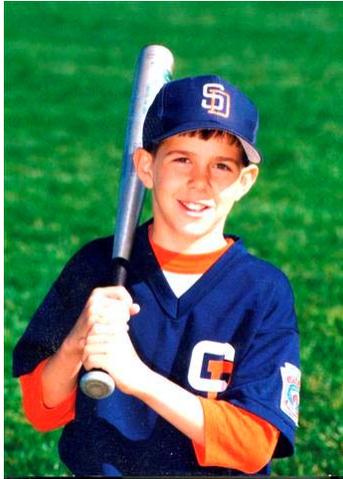
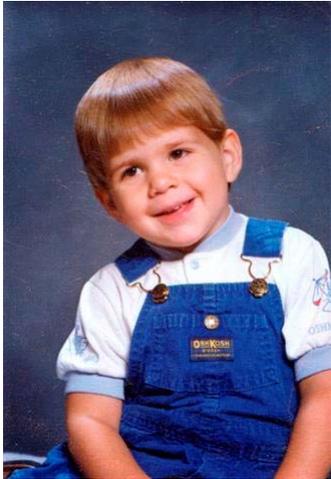
Please let me know if there is anything I can do to support your efforts in addressing the tough issues surrounding the prescription drug abuse epidemic. I simply can't stand idly by while it destroys more American families and their communities. I hope you can't either, because the next statistic could be someone **YOU** love. Please don't think it can't happen to you - it can and does happen to the best of families. I know that now from personal experience.

I respectfully ask that **YOU** consider how you can help facilitate the following actions to help put an end to the prescription drug abuse epidemic:

1. Most adults and youth don't understand how dangerous some prescription drugs can be, especially when misused/abused. They believe they must be safer than illegal drugs because a doctor prescribed them. Please help increase public awareness by providing funding to federal and grassroots agencies with a demonstrated ability to educate adults and youth about the dangers of prescription drug abuse.
2. Strong, highly addictive opiate analgesics such as Oxycodone are currently being prescribed routinely for moderate to severe pain. This prescribing range is far too wide and is resulting in severe over-prescribing by doctors and hospitals. These drugs should only be prescribed for patients with severe pain. Please establish laws that better manage how opiate analgesics are prescribed.
3. Not all states have fully operational Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs (PDMP), and those that are operational don't have interstate functionality. Please establish adequate funding sources for states that need help in establishing these systems. Mandate use of their PDMP by doctors and pharmacists so that "doctor shoppers" can be helped and over-prescribing doctors can be shut down.
4. The prescription drug epidemic has resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of addicts who need treatment, and many simply can't afford to get the help they need. The impact on our communities is enormous in terms of increased crime levels and human suffering. Crime increases as addicts become criminals to support their drug habits. Families become emotionally and financially bankrupt as they deal with their loved one's typically long road to recovery. It's crucial that more affordable drug treatment and care options be established throughout the country to deal with this escalating problem. Please find a way to fund these essential resources.

5. Although most doctors haven't been adequately trained in pain management, they are not restricted from prescribing (and often over-prescribing), very strong, addictive pain medications. Please establish laws requiring that physicians complete adequate, mandatory pain management training in order to prescribe these drugs to their patients with pain.
6. America's colleges and universities are not adequately educating their students about the dangers of prescription drug abuse. Given the college party scene, which often includes excessive drinking and illicit or prescription drug abuse, it's critical that students understand the dangers of misusing, abusing and mixing these substances. Please provide the resources necessary to initiate a national campaign aimed at college students to help save the lives of our country's future leaders.
7. Although the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and local law enforcement agencies are working diligently on multiple fronts to manage prescription drug diversion, it is simply taking far too long to shut down "pill mills" and "dirty doctors" throughout the country. The longer they stay in business, the more lives are lost. Please drive action to streamline processes and to establish special inter-agency task forces to that can more quickly identify and stop unscrupulous medical providers.
8. The United States and New Zealand are the only countries in the world that allow prescription drug commercials to air on network television stations. Despite Pharma's rhetoric that they are simply trying to educate the public about important health issues, these commercials are nothing more than clever marketing tools. Please initiate the action needed to put an end to these harmful advertisements.
9. The pharmaceutical industry has been allowed over time to expand its influence over virtually every facet of American life, using its near unlimited financial resources to influence the FDA and other governmental agencies, our educational research facilities, our legislators and most alarmingly, our physicians and other medical providers. They are influencing medical research, drug trials and are compensating doctors to prescribe the medications they want to become their next blockbuster drug. This spider web of influence needs to be dismantled. Please establish an unbiased Federal task force to examine every facet of the pharmaceutical industry's marketing and development practices and take action necessary to protect end their sphere of influence.

**JOSEPH JOHN ROVERO, III (Joey)**  
**3.9.88** **RIP** **12.18.09**





National Coalition Against Prescription Drug Abuse

[www.ncapda.org](http://www.ncapda.org)



NCAPDA