



Changing the Conversation about Drug Addiction

Art for Social Change



Daura Museum of Art, University of Lynchburg, November 2021

How INTO LIGHT Project was born

Motivated by the death of her son, Devin, to an overdose of fentanyl, founder Theresa Clower took up portrait work as a way of working through her grief. After completing Devin's portrait, she was inspired to find others who lived and died like her son and to show the extent of the drug epidemic through exhibits in each state. She aspired to draw their portraits, tell their stories, and start a dialogue around the disease.

The INTO LIGHT Project, a national non-profit, creates public exhibitions of original portraits and individual stories of people who have died from the disease of drug addiction in locations around the country. Our mission is to change the conversation about drug addiction through the power of original art and story.

We recognize the powerful influence of museums to promote social innovation and are looking for partnerships that inspire social change through art.

INTO LIGHT Project selects one public or academic museum or gallery in each state based on its ability to engage the community by building meaningful educational programming around the exhibit that addresses issues related to the disease of addiction.

Each INTO LIGHT Project exhibition — *Drug Addiction: Real People, Real Stories* — consists of 30 original graphite portraits of people who have died from drug addiction in the state where the exhibit is held. Each portrait is accompanied by a professionally written narrative about the lives of the individuals in the exhibit.

The original, professionally framed portrait is gifted to the family of the person who died at the end of the exhibition.

Since 1999, more than 1.3 million Americans have died from a drug overdose. Overdose deaths have now declined for three consecutive years. That progress is real, and INTO LIGHT's work is part of it: 84% of exhibition viewers report a significant positive change in their attitudes toward people with substance use disorder. Despite this progress, we are still losing more than 190 people every day — nearly 70,000 each year. Overdose remains the leading cause of death for Americans ages 18-44, outpacing car accidents and gun violence.

The conditions that fuel the epidemic have not gone away, and recent narrowing of Medicaid coverage and cuts to federal overdose-prevention program funding put that progress at risk. Sustained investment in treatment, harm reduction, and awareness is what keeps numbers moving in the right direction; without it, recent gains could be reversed.

This staggering loss of life is rooted in misinformation, health inequities, and marginalization of those with substance use disorders (SUD) and extends to their families. It is critical to change public perception around this brain disorder by dispelling deeply entrenched stereotypes, changing stigmatizing language, and stimulating discussion. Research has confirmed that museums and galleries, as trusted sources of information, are uniquely poised to do this.