



2016 SPECIAL EDUCATION
AWARD HERO OF THE YEAR

Patrick Byrne

Lynn, MA Branch 7

James Byrne lived a fairly normal life in many ways. The son of Lynn, MA Branch 7 President **Patrick Byrne**, James had a good upbringing and strong family ties. He had a master's degree in computer science and made a good living in information technology. But throughout his adult life, James had been hooked on heroin, a drug easily found on Lynn's post-industrial

streets. James had periods of sobriety, but circumstances always seemed to steal them from him, eventually.

James had enjoyed seven months clean of drugs when an old friend and fellow addict called him one January day in 2014 to beg James to find heroin. After first refusing, James gave in and bought some for the friend, and apparently couldn't resist using it himself instead. The friend called James on his cell phone over and over, trying to plan a meeting to get the heroin, as James lay dying of an overdose—on the floor of his sister's house, just down the street from his father's home. That's where Patrick found him.

When his son died, Patrick Byrne already had an understanding of the immense difficulties of dealing with chemical dependency. James had struggled with it for two decades, and since retiring from the Postal Service in 2006, Patrick has counseled homeless people in Lynn, many with substance-abuse problems and the mental illness that often comes with them.

The death of his son put the issue in sharp focus, Byrne said, as did the reaction of scores of letter carriers from his own branch and across the country who contacted him about their own family members with chemical dependency after reading about James in *The Postal Record*. "They fought this problem while trying to protect their privacy," he said, "a choice that they now regret.

"We felt confident that his upbringing was solid," he said, but James is proof that parents aren't to blame for drug addiction. "Good parents have kids who have problems," Byrne added. "Parents feel that a child's activity is a reflection on them." But parental shame only makes things worse if it prevents them from seeking help, he said. "You've got to break that."

After making his story public, Byrne heard from many other letter carriers about their own struggles with addiction, depression or



mental illness in their families. “I was shocked at how many people are dealing with similar problems,” he said.

Inspired by Byrne’s experience and his efforts to educate fellow carriers and the broader public about the need to remove the stigma of addiction, the Postal Service’s Employee Assistance Program (EAP) launched the “Silent No More” initiative. The program is designed to help postal employees or their families break through the stigma and shame—whether by helping with suicide prevention, mental illness or chemical dependency—and to share personal stories.

Silent No More urges postal employees to share their experiences with a mental health issue—their own or a family member’s—for which they received help from the EAP. Stories from those who wish they had sought help, or who regret not seeking help sooner, are also welcome.

All communication with the EAP remains confidential and sharing stories is strictly voluntary and separate from EAP assistance or counseling.

The Heroes of the Year judges praised Byrne for helping to turn a personal tragedy into help for other postal workers who need help for substance abuse or suicidal thoughts, but who often suffer in silence.

Byrne said the experience of sharing his story is done as a service to others, much like the way he serves those struggling in his own community, but it’s not part of dealing with his grief. “It isn’t a healing process,” he said—healing requires far more, if it’s even possible. “But you might as well do what you can to help other people.

“I never considered what I had done to be heroic,” Byrne said. Nevertheless, he’s happy that the award is leading to renewed awareness of the Silent No More campaign and of the problems of suicide and addiction.

In naming Byrne the Education Award winner, the judges said they were “impressed that someone could transform a personal tragedy into a mission to help countless people. Awareness, prevention and education are so important to solving problems like these.”