

# Ferguson: 'I don't know how I'm going to ... go on without her'

Continued from Page 1A

The family is awaiting the autopsy report and toxicology results, which won't be ready for several months. Whitney had a history of congestive heart failure; whether this ailment contributed to her death is unclear.

"We can't make assumptions," Geisler said.

What is perfectly clear, however, is that Whitney's death ended a three-year battle that transformed a likable, educated, upwardly mobile young woman with a promising career as a dental assistant into another substance-abuse statistic.

"It destroyed her life," Geisler said.

## 'It doesn't discriminate'

Rather than downplay Whitney's addiction, her family has chosen to speak publicly about it, to turn Whitney's story into a cautionary tale. They hope to cast some light on the malignant drug problem in Astoria, Knappa and surrounding communities that can't be addressed by pretending it away.

"Nobody wants to go public; that's the problem," Geisler said.

In Whitney's obituary and at her memorial service — held Friday at Knappa High School, where Whitney graduated in 2008 — Geisler made her daughter's struggle plain. Though deep in mourning, Geisler spoke with clarity and conviction to the nearly 300 people gathered to pay their respects.

"I need to talk about it," she said in an interview with The Daily Astorian. "I don't ever want another family to go through what I've gone through."

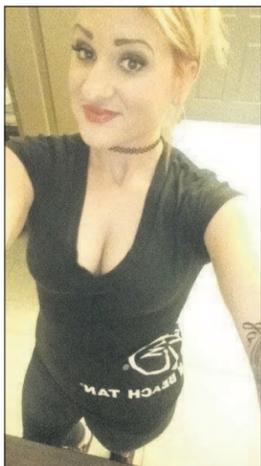
Geisler, in fact, warned Whitney that, if she should die from an overdose, Geisler would tell her daughter's story as a lesson to all who may learn from it.

"I said, 'I'm not hiding it; I'm not sweeping it under the rug,'" she said. "She knew that I was going to speak about it and talk about it and make a difference, because it has to start somewhere."

The tragedy serves as a reminder of how pervasive heroin and meth usage has become in Clatsop County — as it is nationwide — and how easily the drugs can abridge people's futures and the happiness of their families.

Sgt. Mike Smith, of the Clatsop County Sheriff's Office, said that when he joined the county's drug task force he couldn't believe the amount of heroin available.

"At that time, I had 13 or 14 years in law enforcement," he said. "I was shocked."



Courtesy of Brittany Ferguson  
**Whitney Ferguson, from Knappa, took this selfie Dec. 10, the day she relapsed for the last time. She died the following morning while undergoing detox.**



Joshua Bessex/The Daily Astorian  
**Family and friends watch a video tribute during a memorial service for Whitney Ferguson at Knappa High School Friday.**

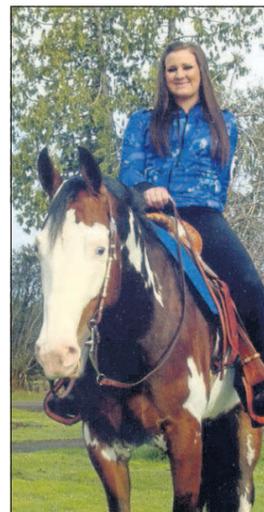


Photo courtesy of Linda Geisler  
**Whitney Ferguson rides her horse in 2008, just a few years before her addiction began.**

The old stereotypes of the bums and junkies on Skid Row didn't apply. A good percentage of today's heroin users hail from middle- or upper-class backgrounds, and many of them — like Whitney — began by abusing prescription painkillers.

"It doesn't matter if you're rich or poor. It doesn't discriminate," Geisler said.

## 'Downhill'

The details of Whitney's final years aren't pretty.

Around the time she began missing work because of her drug use, Whitney's family noticed that some of their possessions had disappeared: money, coins, silver, a wedding ring that had belonged to Geisler's grandmother and other treasures.

"I never thought in a million years my kids would steal anything from me, ever, especially my grandmother's wedding ring," Geisler said. "By the time I even realized it was gone, it'd been gone for months."

From clothing to laptops, Whitney sold anything of value.

"That's the reality of being an addict," said Brittany Ferguson, Whitney's older sister, herself a heroin and meth addict approaching eight months of sobriety. "You lie, cheat and steal."

Whitney lost her job and her residence. Her car was repossessed. She lived with her family on and off, until Geisler and her husband, Ronnie, realized that letting Whitney live with them was merely enabling her.

"You try that drug one time, maybe twice, and everything gets taken away slowly," Geisler said.

Whitney entered rehab more than half a dozen times in Oregon, Washington and California. She repeatedly

overdosed on heroin, landing her in and out hospitals.

High on meth, Whitney would slip into psychosis during which she hid under beds or in closets, talked to herself, talked to plants, talked to people who weren't there. One time, she turned on the gas stove and left it on.

"It just all went downhill real fast," Geisler said.

Whenever Whitney tried to stay clean, she became impatient with her progress. Accustomed to the instant gratification that comes with using, she grew frustrated that she couldn't put her old self back together fast enough.

"You want everything in your life back. You want your job, your car, your house — you want it all back right now," said Brittany, reflecting on her own experience as an addict. "Well, your life didn't get this way in three months or six months. It's taken years for your life to get here, so you need to give yourself a couple years to get it back."

More importantly, she added, "You have to want it more than you want the drug."

## 'My love can't save you'

Near the end, Whitney, who had lost a lot of weight, started selling sexually explicit photos of herself to feed her habit.

"She was soliciting her body," Geisler said. "She would take pictures and do things, and then these men would send her money."

This behavior may not have escalated into straight-up prostitution, but "she was definitely using her body to get money," Casey Wray, Whitney's cousin, said.

The last time she remained clean for a stretch, the light had left her eyes.

"She wasn't the same person. She wasn't there. You

could tell," Brittany said. "She just looked unhealthy and not happy."

While Whitney sought treatment in California, her mother called her every day after getting home from work, and every night before going to bed.

"'You can either,' I said, 'beat this thing and make a stand and educate other people on it, or you can become a statistic,'" Geisler told her. "I thought, 'Maybe she'll get it this time. Maybe this will be it.' But you think that every time they go in."

Whitney passed away shortly thereafter.

"In the back of my mind, I always thought it was a possibility because she was an addict," Geisler said. "You have to prepare yourself mentally for it, although you can never prepare yourself when it really happens."

What remained of Whitney's belongings could fit into two suitcases, two boxes and a tote bag: clothes, jewelry, makeup, fingernail polish, a journal and the Holy Bible.

"I love you more than anything in this whole entire world. My love can't save you," Geisler had told her daughters. "And that's so hard for a parent to say."

## Fighting for their lives

Upon discovering Whitney's addiction, Geisler felt ashamed and embarrassed — and tremendously guilty.

"A mother is supposed to protect (her) children from everything that comes around," she said. "I didn't drink. I didn't smoke. I didn't raise them to be this way. We had dinner every night together."

For many years, Geisler, a longtime employee at Safeway in Astoria, automatically judged the heroin users hanging around the store as losers and dopers too lazy to get

their acts together.

"That's the attitude I had towards them because I wasn't educated; I didn't know anything about that," she said. "And then, after you live it, and you see it, you almost feel sorry for them because it's such a horrible, ugly drug."

But Geisler's views gradually softened when she came to accept that Whitney had almost no control over her habit.

"You're raised with all these great morals," she said, "but that drug just ..."

"... Changes you into a completely different person," Brittany said.

The stigma attached to addiction can be so powerful and persistent that many families won't acknowledge the addiction even after it kills a relative, Wray said.

"They all know what they died from, but nobody's saying it," Wray said. "It's just kind of behind the back in the community."

For addicts to feel comfortable seeking help, the stigma must go away, said Kerry Strickland, of Knappa, whose son, Jordan Strickland, died of an overdose last summer, 13 days before his 25th birthday.

"This is a disease, and these kids didn't choose to be addicts. They were fighting. They were fighting for their lives," Strickland said. "I believe these two kids would have kept fighting for sobriety, to be clean. I believe they had that in them."

## 'Toad'

Geisler and Strickland are working to open a local chap-

ter of the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence.

"Our goal is to bring it here to Clatsop County, where we can provide resources," Strickland said.

Brittany said that anti-drug education needs to begin in middle schools, led not just by law enforcement or people who have never tried narcotics but by former users willing to share their stories.

For Geisler and Strickland, the project is bitter-sweet: Though a place that offers tools for drug education, prevention and treatment is badly needed, it's not going to help Whitney and Jordan. But it is a way to honor them, and possibly to prevent more lost lives.

"My daughter was an addict," Geisler said, "but, yes she was my daughter, and I loved her regardless."

Now the ashes of Whitney Ferguson — the care-free girl who loved her horses and sheep and took part in 4-H for nine years, and whose family called her "Toad" because, as a baby, "she was a fat little thing that would lay there on her arms and legs like a big toad," Geisler said — reside in the house where she grew up.

"I don't know how I'm going to get up every single day and go on without her, because I live my life for my kids, and I'm never going to see her walk through my front door again and give me a hug," Geisler said at Whitney's memorial. "She knew that I loved her, and I'll miss her so much. It's going to be really unbearable."

# Luciaks: They're set to launch their business this month

Continued from Page 1A

The Luciaks are due to launch their business, Oregon Mold Medix, an indoor mold consultation, inspection and remediation company, this month. The couple believes it will provide a much-needed service in the area. They hope, in particular, to help low-income families, who tend to be disproportionately affected by the problem. Joseph said if 1 in 10 of their remediation projects could be done for a low-income family, then they can have a "fairly significant impact with our effort."

"I don't think those goals are that ambitious," he added. "We all live here because we love the air outside."

They are excited to get the business off the ground.

"By this time next year, I think we will be able to say we have had a bigger impact," through both their business and charity work, Britta said.

They enjoy living in a small, tight-knit community. The advantage of having good neighbors was evident when, during the summer, By the Way owner Linda Goldfarb temporarily closed her shop to help the couple look for their missing basset hound, Columbo. She located the dog on U.S. Highway 101 near the Sons of Norway Field.

"It's nice to not just be anonymous in the big city,"

Britta said. "Here's it's so much closer knit."

Joseph agreed. "This place is so neighborly," he said. "When we walk down the street, I wish the locals would start to adopt the nod, because my arm gets sore from constantly waving at people."

When not working, Britta and Joseph share time outdoors with Columbo, going outside during storms, hiking and camping. They also enjoy watching documentaries.

In Vancouver, Britta and

Joseph managed bars, dance clubs and live music venues. They volunteered with the Access to Music Foundation, a nonprofit organization that provides children in British Columbia with instruments and music education opportunities. Joseph recently resigned his post as chairman of the foundation. After heavy involvement at a community level with performing arts and community service, Joseph said, they "haven't really been culturally stimulated yet down here."

"We're really looking to get involved in any sort of capacity," he added.

They feel Gearhart is a good place to be and to raise their first child, due in March.

"We'll give it a good shot here for a while and see how it goes," Britta said.

your local  
**Janitorial & Paper Supply Store**  
WALTER E. NELSON CO.

**Benjamin Moore**

503-325-6362 • 800-344-1943  
2240 COMMERCIAL ST. ASTORIA  
Millpond Area  
Monday-Friday 8 am-5 pm

OPEN 24 HOURS  
7 DAYS A WEEK

**ROYAL CAB L.L.C.**  
Established 1996

DOWNLOAD THE GATA HUB  
THROUGH YOUR MOBILE DEVICE  
AND BOOK YOUR RIDE!

CLATSOP COUNTY  
503-325-5818

PACIFIC COUNTY  
360-665-3500

• SMOKE FREE •  
BIKE RACKS ON ALL VEHICLES  
10% Military Discount  
Pet Friendly

cash & debit  
DISCOVER  
VISA

Visit our website  
for specials

Open 24 hours / 7 days a week!  
www.royalcab.net

The On-Air Radio  
Auction is  
January 23rd,  
9am to 1pm

1370 AM  
**KAST**  
NEWS TALK FOR THE COAST

Providing live and local news coverage every day  
You could see it tonight, read about  
it tomorrow or hear it live NOW!