

**I am an American We are One Nation**

## **CORONER BATTLES HEROIN EPIDEMIC**

Spike in addiction deaths spurs official to challenge how problem is treated

**MIKE ARGENTO**

USA TODAY NETWORK February 20, 2017

*Each week, this series will introduce you to an exceptional American who is making a difference to unite, rather than divide, our communities. To read more about the American profiled here and more average Americans doing exceptional things, visit [onenation.usatoday.com](http://onenation.usatoday.com) When Pam Gay ran for coroner of York County, Pa., heroin wasn't considered a major public health issue.*



CHRIS DUNN/USA TODAY NETWORK

**York County Coroner Pam Gay saw the heroin-related death total spike in 2014. She has become an advocate for addiction treatment and helps lead the York County Heroin Task Force.**

**Pam Gay**

**Location:** York County, Pa. **Age:** 55 **Profession:** York County Coroner **Mission:** To use her office to combat the opioid epidemic

The number of heroin overdoses had been fairly steady, 10 to 12 a year. But in 2013, the office investigated 17 overdoses, and Gay's chief deputy warned, "I think this may be a problem for us next year."

It was.

Not a month after Gay took office, the number of heroin deaths had already exceeded the number from the previous year. "That's when we really knew that we were facing a real problem," she said.

By the end of 2014, her first year in office, 62 people died from heroin overdoses, ranking mostly rural York County sixth among Pennsylvania's 67 counties in per capita heroin deaths.

Gay knew then that her role as coroner would change. In Pennsylvania, coroners are charged with determining the cause and manner of unattended deaths. Medical training is not a prerequisite, but Gay had worked as an emergency department nurse and as an educator.

She also had experience dealing with addicts. Her niece had been addicted to alcohol and crack, and Gay and her husband were drawn into her life, raising her children

while she struggled with addiction. It gave her “a different perspective” on the issue, she said. (Her niece has been sober for a decade, and they are very close now.) Gay set about transforming the coroner’s office. She became an advocate for treatment, specifically methadone therapy. She was a leader in the county’s heroin task force. She helped bring a needle-exchange program to the county.

And she campaigned to equip police and other first responders with naloxone, which reverses the effects of an overdose. The drug had been used in emergency rooms for years, she said. It’s easy to use, it is effective and it could save lives.

Since April 2015, police and first responders have used naloxone to save more than 330 people.

“I’m just doing my job,” she said. “This is what we have to deal with.”

## **Q&A WITH PAM GAY**

### **What does it mean to you to be an American?**

I am so thankful to be an American. A friend of mine who lives in a less advanced country once reminded me that people do not get to choose where they are born, and many times that simple demographic detail of where one is born can be the factor that determines how long they will live, quality of life and if they will ever enjoy the freedoms that we are afforded simply by being born here.

### **What moment touched and motivated you to launch this effort?**

Two things: One happened 13 years ago when my husband and I suddenly were caught up in the world of drug and alcohol addiction when we discovered that our niece was an addict. Fast forward to 2014 when I first became coroner, one of our earliest decedents, who died from her heroin addiction, was a young mother of two children who had recently been working hard to get sober. The media picked up on the story, and suddenly our community realized we were in the middle of something unlike anything we had experienced before.

### **What gives me hope?**

People give me hope. Especially all the wonderful people I’ve met in the three years I’ve been involved in this effort. People who’ve lost children and parents, people in recovery from heroin or other opioid addiction who bravely tell their story, people who are leading efforts to help in the rehab/recovery process, elected officials who are trying to learn as much as they can to craft helpful legislation, hospital ED physicians and nurses and law enforcement/ EMS/fire departments who administer naloxone during overdose without reservation. All of these people inspire me to keep fighting this fight.

### **What do I hope to accomplish?**

I hope that through our office being so vocal about this issue of heroin and opioid addiction that we would one day see a month, several months, even a year go by without a death from this disease.