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NEW YORK

Gary Mendell Is New Voice in the Fight Against Addiction

Former Hotel Executive Is Motivated By Son's Drug Abuse, Death

By MELANIE GRAYCE WEST

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Gary Mendell Keelin Daly for *The Wall Street Journal*

Like a lot of doting parents with adult children, Gary Mendell gushes about his son, Brian. But he is perhaps quicker than most to share a too-cute memento from the childhood of his firstborn, the one he called his "best friend."

The 57-year-old former hotel executive, one of the founders and owners of the Norwalk, Conn.-based HEI Hotels & Resorts, is sitting in the lobby of New York's Algonquin hotel—a favorite project from his decades in the industry. He carries in his briefcase a rainbow-colored note Brian wrote at age 6 or 7, that says, in part, "To me your [sic] the only thing that matters."

Now, Mr. Mendell says, Brian is the only thing that matters. His son's drug addiction and ultimate suicide in October 2011 at the age of 25—after a year of sobriety—set Mr. Mendell on a new path.

Gary Mendell

Founder and CEO of Shatterproof, a two-year-old charity originally founded as Brian's Wish

Chairman and co-owner of HEI Hotels & Resorts, which he helped to found. Retired as chief executive in 2012

Shatterproof has raised \$8 million, including Mr. Mendell's own \$5 million gift.

In 2012, he left his career to dedicate himself full-time to the launch of a organization called Shatterproof, which he hopes will become the first national umbrella group dedicated to addiction—a goal that has ruffled a few feathers among existing nonprofits. Mr. Mendell put in \$5 million of his own money to start the group, and has raised another \$3

million.

Shatterproof follows the model of big one-stop groups such as the American Cancer Society or Autism Speaks. Its mission encompasses everything from influencing public policy —such as advocating for wide availability of Naloxone, a heroin antidote, and liberal "Good Samaritan" laws—to funding research into prevention, treatment and recovery, to providing information and support for families.

A key ambition is to reduce the stigma and shame associated with addiction.

"The message someone gets if you're addicted is, 'We don't care about you, go take care of yourself,'" said Mr. Mendell. "And if you relapse, we aren't going to take you to the hospital. We will take you to jail."

Mr. Mendell's son—"my Brian," as he calls him—"died from shame."

Mr. Mendell believes his timing to launch an organization is right because two provisions in federal laws are poised to help vast numbers of Americans get treatment for addiction.

The Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act requires any insurance plan that covers mental health and substance abuse disorders to cover those treatments in parity to treatments for physical disorders. That goes into effect on Tuesday. The Affordable Care Act—key parts went into effect on Jan. 1— will require every new insurance plan in the country to cover mental health and substance abuse.

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—Gary Mendell

”

The combination of the two laws, says Mr. Mendell, is what matters. "If it's not parity, it's irrelevant."

To be sure, addiction-focused organizations have existed for decades, with most focused on one aspect of the problem—either prevention, treatment or recovery. Stephen J. Pasierb, president and chief executive of New York's Partnership for Drug-Free Kids, said there should be "a coming together in the addiction field."

"The question is: Do you bring people together or do you put something on top and above them all?" said Mr. Pasierb. "Gary has leaned more to the above and top of all, so there's some tensions."

Mr. Mendell said "a few" nonprofits in the industry have been upset with his "businesslike" approach and would like more collaboration. In response to the criticism, he says his way is Business 101.

Addiction on the Rise

Some key trends in American drug abuse from a national survey:

An estimated 23.9 million Americans age 12 and older were current illicit drug users.

Within the past 12 months, about 7,900 persons a day in that age group used an illicit drug for the first time.

Around 65 percent of survey respondents said their first drug was marijuana.

Some 156,000 people aged 12 and over used heroin for the first time within the past year, up from 90,000 in 2006.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2012 National Survey on Drug Use and Health

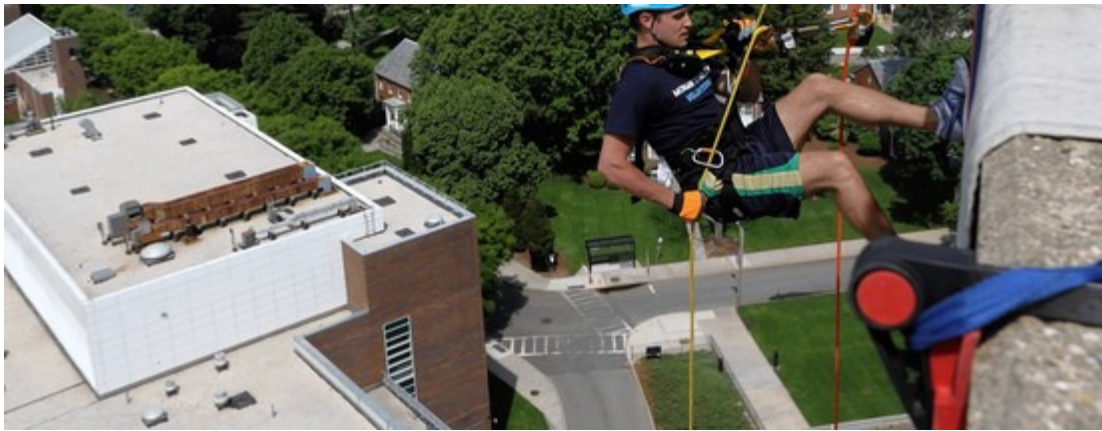
"In any industry in the business world where there are a lot of small organizations, the most efficient way to make impact is to consolidate," said Mr. Mendell, who is exploring mergers with other groups. "You don't want a bunch of small companies with their own accounting, their own PR, their own human resources. It's just inefficient."

Shatterproof's goals include a series of 16 rappelling events across the country—people using ropes to lower themselves down the side of a building. Mr. Mendell says he wanted a "bold and different" signature fundraising event, not another "me-too" 5K run or walk.

They were designed to bring in individual donations, corporate support and, most important to Mr. Mendell, associate addiction with something positive. The six events this year have raised some \$750,000, according to Shatterproof; the next two are set for July 29 in Hartford, Conn., and Aug. 1 in Westchester. More than two dozen rappelling fundraisers are already planned for 2015.

Impassioned founders are a cornerstone of many well-known charities and Mr. Mendell follows in the path of others who became the national face of an organization.





At the Shatterproof Challenge, a participant rappelled down a building at Nassau Community College to raise money to fight addiction. *Ed Lederman/Shatterproof*

Among the best known are John Walsh, who co-founded the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children after the abduction and murder of his son, and Nancy Brinker, who founded the breast-cancer charity, Susan G. Komen, upon her sister's death.

Robert L. DuPont, a physician who has worked in the addiction field and public health for more than four decades, said Mr. Mendell "brings phenomenal organizational and business skills, and he's got an ability to reach to the highest levels almost effortlessly." including government officials and heads of insurance companies. Dr. DuPont is an adviser to Shatterproof.

"I think the question in my mind is, exactly where is it going?" he added.

Many in the addiction field say that an increase in prescription-drug abuse, the rise of designer and synthetic drugs and the legalization of marijuana and a normalization of its use are serving as lightning rods for people working in the addiction field.

Dr. DuPont calls this the "third wave" of the country's drug epidemic. The first was President Richard Nixon's war on drugs in the early 1970s and the second was the urban crack epidemic in late 1980s with, he said.

"The real ground zero for Shatterproof is families who have lost members to drugs," said Dr. DuPont. "That is a very large number of people, many of who are quite well-to-do. I think it's a tremendous market for philanthropy."

Write to Melanie Grayce West at melanie.west@wsj.com

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