

# Venezuela didn't kill my son, the Sackler family did

While Nicolás Maduro awaits trial for "narco-terrorism" charges, a top US drug trafficking family – the Sackler clan – is paying its victims and continuing to live lavishly. The Grayzone's Kei Pritsker spoke to Dede Yoder, whose son died of a fentanyl overdose after being prescribed Oxycontin, a dangerous opioid deceptively marketed by the Sackers' Purdue Pharma. Yoder explains how the Sacklers have philanthropy-washed their way out of real accountability for systematically poisoning America. ||| The Grayzone ||| Find more reporting at <https://thegrayzone.com> Support our original journalism at Patreon: <https://patreon.com/grayzone> Facebook: <https://facebook.com/thegrayzone> Twitter: <https://twitter.com/thegrayzonenews> Instagram: <https://instagram.com/thegrayzonenews> Minds: <https://minds.com/thegrayzone> Mastodon: <https://mastodon.social/@thegrayzone> #TheGrayzone

## #Kei

While the Trump administration parades Nicolás Maduro around as the face of the international drug trade, one of America's most notorious drug-trafficking families will be quietly making settlement payments to thousands of its victims. Starting this year, the Sackler family—otherwise known as the godfathers of the opioid crisis—will be making payments between \$8,000 and \$16,000 to tens of thousands of people who were prescribed OxyContin, the prescription pain medication and opioid that the Sacklers aggressively and deceptively pushed onto the public as safe and non-addictive.

Many of the people who were prescribed OxyContin got addicted and turned to cheaper opioids like heroin and fentanyl, leading to thousands of overdose deaths. Overall, the opioid crisis has taken the lives of over 900,000 Americans since 1999. Unlike Nicolás Maduro, not a single member of the Sackler family has seen a day in prison—and won't under the terms of this settlement. Today, we're going to be talking to Dede Yoder, the mother of Chris Yoder, who was prescribed OxyContin in high school and died of a fentanyl overdose at just 21 years old. Dede is one of several mothers who've been waging a years-long battle against the Sacklers to get justice for her son.

## #Guest

See, this is the one my lawyer liked. I don't know if you need better lighting, but this was the young, happy Chris getting ready to tackle life with strength. Chris was born on October 12, 1995, and I was a single mom. He had a sort of estranged relationship with his father, but I was very happy to raise Chris. He was a very happy kid—energetic, active, and he loved sports, particularly snowboarding, skateboarding, and mountain biking. When he was 13, he had a snowboarding accident and injured his knee, and he had to have a knee operation. Then, right when he was being

cleared from that, he had an acute appendicitis attack, had to go to the hospital, and have his appendix removed. All of those operations were followed by prescriptions for opioids.

He and his friends were typical teenagers—you know, sneaking off and drinking beer occasionally or smoking a little marijuana, nothing out of the ordinary. And then Chris kind of went off and started seeking drugs, much stronger drugs, and his friends were really alarmed and trying to help. In the middle of his senior year, I got a call from his guidance counselor who said that one of his friends had told a teacher that Chris was doing heroin. I nearly—I couldn't believe it. I couldn't imagine this happening in this beautiful town of Irvington, with these wonderful friends he had. This just doesn't happen here. A month before he graduated from high school, I sent him to rehab. I thought, well, you send him to rehab and everything's done. But unfortunately, that's the sad story that I'm sure a lot of people who've dealt with addiction know—it's not done after 30 days of rehab.

He had gotten a scholarship to Ithaca College and didn't even make it through the first semester. I mean, he just crashed and burned. The next couple of years were just one rehab after another. He probably went to about eight different rehabs. And, of course, insurance never covered them. They were never covered by insurance. I used most of my retirement money trying to help my son. But the inevitable happened. I was actually on a business trip in Paris, of all places, and I got a call. I was having dinner with my colleague, and a detective called. He said—this always gets me—"There's no easy way to say this, but your son is deceased." My son was 21 at that point. I had to get on a nine-hour flight back to bury my son, basically. I always loved this picture of Chris.

## **#Kei**

Was this a school photo?

## **#Guest**

No, this was just... Oh, maybe it was, actually. It looks like it might have been. Yeah. There are, I don't know, lots of photos. I mean, just... I think this is in Florida. We used to go there a lot. Oh, and here he is with the blond boy again, James, getting a little older. I spread his ashes in many different places—some on the Hudson River. I actually gave some of his ashes to his friends at his memorial service, and they spread them in the places where they hung out in Irvington, like up in the woods and down on the river. And then I brought some with me to Colorado. I brought some with me to Taos, New Mexico, where my brother lived. I brought some to Paris. So he's—he's all over. Yeah. Hard to believe he's not here.

## **#Kei**

Unknown to Dede and thousands of other families at the time was that their loved ones were victims not of random tragedy, but of the unabated greed of the billionaire Sackler family. Up through the 1990s, medical professionals were very reluctant to use opioids to treat pain because of how

powerful they were, and they only used them to treat cancer patients. The Sacklers, who had developed their own opioid pain medication, OxyContin, waged an aggressive PR campaign—utilizing bribery and outright fraud—to convince the medical establishment that opioids really weren't harmful or addictive at all. They succeeded, and the Sacklers made billions of dollars off it.

It took years for people to figure out that drugs like OxyContin were causing opioid addiction because the Sacklers used massive legal power and political connections to silence their critics. For example, the Sacklers' company, Purdue Pharma, was facing federal investigations for fraud as early as the mid-2000s that threatened to shut it down. But Purdue hired former New York mayor and Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani to defend them, and even though they were found guilty, Giuliani was able to cut a deal where Purdue could keep selling OxyContin, the senior executives wouldn't go to prison, and the company would be shielded from further investigations.

The Sacklers also protected their image by mastering the art of philanthropy washing. They donated millions of dollars to charitable causes, which got their name plastered on buildings at the Guggenheim Museum, the Louvre, and academic centers at Yale and Harvard, as well as the Center of Medicine at Tel Aviv University. No one would have suspected that these seemingly selfless philanthropists were deeply engaged in criminal activity if it weren't for the efforts of medical whistleblowers, muckraking journalists, and family advocates like Dede Yoder.

## **#Guest**

It wasn't until after Chris's memorial service that my cousin sent me an article from *\*The New Yorker\** about Patrick Radden Keefe's book *\*Empire of Pain\**. It told the story of the Sackler family and how they falsely marketed OxyContin, and how they were being credited with starting and fueling the opioid epidemic. That was the moment I had this awakening — that my son was really murdered. I had no idea. He didn't stand a chance. I've learned now that he'd get 30-day prescriptions for OxyContin. After about 10 days, you become addicted because it's a time-released medicine. And then, within one year, he had three different operations. It was like the cards were stacked against him.

## **#Kei**

Can you talk about some of the things the Sacklers misrepresented or lied about to the public?

## **#Guest**

They had whole campaigns. They started nonprofit organizations saying we weren't doing enough about pain. I mean, I think they're also credited with creating the pain scale in hospitals — you know, from 1 to 10. They actually bribed the FDA to change the pamphlet for OxyContin so it said it could be used around the clock. The guy at the FDA, whose name was Curtis Wright, ended up going to work for Purdue after he left the agency.

**#Kei**

Not only did they lie about OxyContin, but internal communications from the Sacklers' company, Purdue Pharma, show that they knowingly targeted doctors and opioid-naïve patients so doctors would prescribe OxyContin for more than just cancer pain. They even went as far as giving doctors CDs and plush toys, and they ended up pleading guilty to illegally paying kickbacks. How do you feel about this new settlement being approved?

**#Guest**

It's like a hollow victory. It's settled — the Sacklers have to pay \$6.54 billion. But once again, throughout the whole process, the victims are at the bottom of the pile. It was politics, big money, and lawyers that really got most of the settlement. And there was also this attitude about the victims — like, oh, you know, they're just a bunch of drug addicts, which is basically what the Sacklers were saying when people started questioning them about what they were doing.

**#Kei**

The full quote from Richard Sackler's email was, "I saw PBS said eight to sixteen."

**#Guest**

I saw that in a New York Times article too.

**#Kei**

I mean, my reaction was, "That can't be real."

**#Guest**

Yeah, right. It's kind of mind-boggling.

**#Kei**

Yeah. So the Trump administration has brought drug trafficking — or the drug crisis — back into the news by using it as a pretext to launch some of these attacks against Venezuela, and of course the kidnapping of the president. But do you think these attacks on Venezuela will actually do anything to stop the drug crisis?

**#Guest**

Well, first of all, starting with the fact that he pardoned the president of Honduras, who was going to jail for 45 years — I just looked this up — he was responsible for bringing in 400 tons of cocaine bound for the United States over a certain period of time. And he was pardoned by President Trump. This is at the same time he's talking about having to stop the drugs coming into the U.S. And now we don't even hear about that, because now we're talking about oil and getting the oil. So no, I don't think he cares, because the main thing—well, he also talked about the fentanyl that's coming into the country.

And, by the way, fentanyl is what killed my son. You know, he wanted to put a higher tariff on Canada, and very little fentanyl is coming in from Canada. It's coming from China to Mexico. I guess the materials to make fentanyl are coming from China, and they're making it in Mexico. And I don't think it's on the backs of all these illegal immigrants coming into the country. I think it's probably a more organized movement. So, no, I don't think he's—whatever he's doing—is effective at all in stopping drug traffic.

## **#Kei**

Has the Trump administration reached out to any of the Sackler victims? Have you heard from them in any way?

## **#Guest**

Nothing. No, I mean, as a matter of fact, the first Trump administration was one of the ones that started the appeal for the first settlement, saying it was illegal to give them third-party releases. I mean, the Biden administration was also involved in stopping the settlement as well, but they never really helped bring the Sacklers to justice.

## **#Kei**

I think when a lot of people think about the drug crisis or drug trafficking, they picture people in black ski masks, people coming from foreign countries. But they never really talk about the guy in a \$3,000 suit or the one flying on a private jet. Why do you think that is?

## **#Guest**

I don't know. That's how the Sacklers got away with it all these years. You know, there was a great article—I think it was in the Times or something—called *\*Drug Dealers in Armani Suits.\** People like to, I guess, believe in appearances. I mean, drugs have always been thought of as part of the underworld or the... So I guess it's an image thing. Who wants to think about proper people actually doing that? I just hope things get better so people don't have to go through what I went through, and what the people I know went through. Every day I think about the fact that my son's life

stopped at 21. It couldn't go forward. And every day I'm reminded of it, because I'm surrounded by people who are having new grandchildren, going to their kids' weddings—and I'll never have that. So, um, it's something you don't get over. It would be great to see some progress with that, for other people. Yes.