Author Renée Hodges tells the story of her nephew Bobby who was released from a treatment facility but wasn’t ready to return to society. She offers many lessons on how families and communities can work together to fill the many gaps in helping those addicted to drugs truly recover and truly stay sober.

NOPE Task Force asked Hodges to share her story and offer insights on what can be done to end the opioid epidemic.

1) Tell us about your book.

Hodges: When my nephew Bobby came to live with my husband and I in 2013, I reached out to my community of friends and family and professionals to help me in his recovery from an opioid/heroin addiction. Bobby became addicted after being prescribed opioids by a physician for a chronic back ailment while he was still in college, almost seven years earlier. When Bobby arrived in Durham, he had just been released from another in a list of treatment centers, and he was struggling to stay substance free. It was sixteen months before Bobby was able to assimilate back into society. Saving Bobby is a story of recovery -- an uplifting and inspirational story, of which there are precious few. It begins when Bobby has left yet another treatment facility and is struggling with recovery.

2) What did you learn in writing your book that surprised you? And explain why.

Hodges: Thank you for letting me share the lessens I learned in hindsight from taking in and caring for my nephew.

First, we must talk openly and honestly about addiction, or we will leave our future generations vulnerable to the disease. Secondly, Bobby’s story illustrates how ill-prepared many addicts are when they are leaving the safety and security of a treatment center or half-way house and I believe we are missing a crucial, and perhaps the most vulnerable period in an addict’s recovery. When Bobby came to live with us, it was apparent that he was not yet ready to be out in the world, even though he had just been discharged from a rehab facility. Not surprisingly, it would be a little bit longer than the two weeks we had planned for him to stay with us. In actuality, it was sixteen months longer.

Bobby’s family was very important to his recovery, too. For many years, they had done everything they knew to do to help Bobby overcome his addiction. By turning Bobby over, by loving him from afar, they
gave him not tough love, but clear love. And, this allowed Bobby to have enough distance to be able to see how his disease was affecting those he loved most.

From the very beginning, I leaned on this community of mine, trusting that sharing this situation would be the right thing to do. By doing this, we were lessening the shame and stigma of the disease and we were giving him a support system.

Yes, Bobby was substance-free and newly released from rehab and a half-way house, but he had a long way to go before he would have a successful long-term recovery.

Lastly, no one recovers in isolation; nor should they have to. I shared my community with Bobby and they lessened the shame and stigma of his disease while giving him his self-esteem back. Not everyone has the wonderful community that we have, and every situation is unique. For those in recovery, reach out and find your community, whether AA or NA, church, a counselor, family or friends who will support and keep you accountable. For caregivers, reach out and find your community, too.

Addiction is a disease, and it cannot be hidden away like a colony of lepers on an isolated island, shameful and out of sight. We all must take heroin and opioid addiction, and all addiction, out of the closet, bring it out in the open, and fight it together—head-on. This is the only way we are going to help our most precious possessions—our loved ones.

4) What can parents/caregivers do to prevent tragedies related to substance abuse of their children?

Hodges: Talk openly to alleviate the shame of the family and the recovering addict. Secrets make you sick. #noblamenoshame
- Join organizations like Shatterproof.org.
- Educate your children from a young age, teaching them that sometimes living without pain (physical and emotional) is sometimes more deadly that living with it.
- Lock up your prescription medications.
- Hold your loved one accountable.
- Use clear structure and holistic healing.
- Hire a professional for yourself and for your struggling loved one.
- Reach out and find your own community for support, both caregiver and “re-coverer.”

5) If there's a way to end the current opioid epidemic, do you have thoughts on what it would take to do that?

Hodges: It has been written that it will take years and billions of dollars to end this current epidemic. New York Times columnist Nick Kristoff reports: About as many Americans are expected to die this year of drug overdoses as died in the Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan wars combined. If this is true, whatever we are doing now is clearly not enough.

A few things we can do now to help to end the opioid epidemic are to:
- Cut off the supply of illegal Fentanyl and heroin into our country
- Publicize all politicians who give money to Big Pharma
- Require Big Pharma to contribute to the cost of rehabilitation of opioid addicts
- Continue to educate physicians and the public, and make medical stepdown treatments commonplace for those who have trouble staying substance-free
- Continue to write your legislators and advocate for change.
- And, to remember that we are all in this together

Saving Bobby: Heroes and the Heroin in One Small Community was published in May 2018 by She Writes Press and is now in its third printing.

The book earned a Silver Medal in the Living Now Awards in the category of Inspirational Memoir-Female. It won a Gold Medal from the Readers’ Favorite Awards in the category of Inspirational Nonfiction.

Although her Louisiana roots run deep, Renée Hodges and her husband have called North Carolina home for the past thirty years. Hodges has worked as a campaign manager for a candidate for the Texas State House of Representatives; and volunteer recruiter and registration head during a presidential campaign in New York City. She also co-wrote and self-published the Best Kept Secrets series of guides in the 1980s. Settling into motherhood and raising a family has been her most satisfying work however, and today she is a wife, mother of three, writer, investor, community activist and volunteer, and avid tennis player.