

# ADDICTION

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## SUMMIT



### Recovery for Life: Sharing Your Stories

Guest: Anita Devlin

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**Dr. Paul Thomas:** Welcome. I'm Dr. Paul, your host to the Addiction Summit. Today, it is my pleasure and privilege to introduce to you Anita Devlin. She is one of what I would call my ferocious moms, somebody who has lived and been through the pain of addiction in her family. She is the executive director and president of Above the Noise Foundation, which I'm sure she'll tell us more about. She is the co-author with her son of a memoir entitled *Sober*. Her son, Michael Devlin, Jr., now sober for several years when they put this message together. It's a message of hope and faith.

She's a speaker for change. She works with SAMHSA, the Recovery Planning Partner. But most of all I'd say she's an advocate for mothers. You know; if you're watching this and you're a mom or a parent, and you have a child who is still active in addiction; we're frightened. We are absolutely scared that we're going to get that phone call, that our son is either in jail or dead.

I thought, maybe, Anita, as sort of helping people understand where you came from to be such a powerful advocate for moms, maybe share a little bit of your story.

**Anita Devlin:** Thank you, Paul. My son is over 7 years now in recovery. And where I come from is something that will always be a part of me. I will never forget the fear that I lived through. Besides the fear, the isolation that I felt. That was a long time ago, remember. This was over 7 years now in recover. So

he started in high school. We're talking 15 years ago when I started going through this. And back then, no one was even talking about opioids.

**Dr. Thomas:** Right.

**Anita:** We knew. Mothers; some of us knew that something was up with our sons. But back then, I can remember they were in high school. They were athletes. They were on sports teams. We thought they were doing steroids.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yeah. Your son was a good athlete, wasn't he?

**Anita:** Yeah. And that's how everything started. I'm not going to say that—listen, I'm really, really honest. And I'll always shoot from the hip, Paul. I'm not going to say that my son never drank or did anything else before this happened. But when the injuries occurred, and he had back to back surgeries. Again, no doctor ever over-prescribed my son, either. That wasn't even necessary. It was just back to back. Surgery after surgery after surgery. That's when his addiction started.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yeah. What were his injuries?

**Anita:** Shoulders, ankles.

**Dr. Thomas:** Ok. He was a lacrosse player, I think.

**Anita:** Yes. And that was something [inaudible]. He was a really good player. Then when everything started happening and he couldn't play anymore; as a young kid you're thinking; ok. It's an identity like a father with his child.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yeah.

**Anita:** Depression sets in. All kinds of things happened. So he was reaching for something that he apparently couldn't stop reaching for.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yeah. This story of injury, or somehow legitimately prescribed opioids leading to an opioid addiction is so common. I'm a pediatrician and an addiction specialist, and we see this so often. Until very recently, prescription opioids was the number one cause of deaths in America from opioid overdose. Just recently, heroin and fentanyl hitting the streets has now caused that form of opioid to be number one for overdose deaths, which are, as you know, just escalating and tragic.

**Anita:** Alcohol is still number one though, isn't it?

**Dr. Thomas:** It is. Yes. Actually, even if we want to add food and obesity, that would be even higher. And cigarettes and tobacco even higher. But yes, deaths related to alcohol are still far exceeding opioid deaths. Even though the opioids get all the attention in the news.

**Anita:** Right.

**Dr. Thomas:** So, as his addiction was progressing; what happened? Tell us about the bitter end. How bad did it get?

**Anita:** You know, when you look back on it, you think about the fact that when I look back on what was happening with myself. And again, as a mother, people would say, "You're making it all about you." It was about the entire family, absolutely. His illness affected all of us. I think as a mother you try so hard; at least I did. Again, I only know my story, our family's story. That's all I talk about.

I think as my son's illness was escalating, that was mine. He was manipulative. He was lying. He was keeping secrets. So was I.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yeah.

**Anita:** That's what my whole life was about. So as my son was getting sicker and sicker, I was getting sicker and sicker. This was happening to both of us, side by side. But you don't see it when you're in the thick of it. As a parent, there's so much confusion. And you're petrified of reaching out for support, and going to someone and saying, "What do I do? This is what I think is happening." Because of course, there's that big judgment. The judgment that you're always surrounded by. You're afraid to talk about it. So yes, very, very scary.

My son did reach out to us after he went to college and told us that he was having issues with the pills. And we pulled him out of school on a medical leave. And we brought him back to New York. He'd been at college in Vermont. We took him; he did outpatient therapy. We even tried to do things with acupuncture, making sure it wasn't the pain he was still having from all those injuries.

We did all kinds of things for him; the things that we thought were going to help. He thought he could take care of it on his own, and he went back to

college. And he couldn't do it on his own. He didn't have support. He fell back into it, and it really started escalating.

I think it was his junior year of college, and he wasn't around so we really didn't know. And he ended up coming home junior year of college for Christmas. It's so long ago, but to still talk about it...

**Dr. Thomas:** It's tough.

**Anita:** To go back there, and I think about it. He walked in the door that Christmas, and that was when; sober is an acronym for son of a b\*tch, everything is real.

**Dr. Thomas:** I always wondered what it stood for, yes.

**Anita:** He walked in that door. I think it was the first time I actually really looked at my son. I had always been looking past him and blaming it on his friends and who he was spending time with. I was never looking at him because as mothers, our children are perfect.

**Dr. Thomas:** Right. You just remember that perfect little baby, and they're your world.

**Anita:** That was the day that I realized; ok. But I also kind of knew enough at that point in time. We had tried to help him before this, but I knew. I can't fix what's happening with my son. I can't control what's happening with my son. I certainly didn't cause it. He needs to realize; he asked for help once before. He needs to realize that he needs to go much further into it to reach out for help for this. And when the time is right, he will.

All I could tell him, and all any of us could do, was just let him know that we would support him. How much we loved him. But this was his journey, and he had to reach out for the help when he was ready. He had to want to find his recovery.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yeah. Was he ready that Christmas?

**Anita:** No. He went back to school, and a lot of things changed with our dynamics. As a mother, for a long time, I had been always the fixer. If something was wrong, I tried to make it ok for him. I didn't want him to have any precious; I never allowed my son to struggle. And he never was held accountable for anything. Mom always fixed it, because I always wanted my

family to be perfect. If he got into trouble, I'd take care of it. No matter what it was. He did something with the car, I got it fixed and didn't tell my husband. We just; that's just what I did as a mother.

**Dr. Thomas:** That's what we do. Yep.

**Anita:** He went back to school, and I stopped answering the phone every time he called. I stopped giving him things. I stopped helping fix things for him. I just wasn't present constantly. I started focusing on my own self-care. I started doing things that made me feel good. I started going back to church. I started doing charity work. All the things I had stopped doing for years, because I was on his illness.

And that's when my son really spiraled. And we received a call in January, probably 6 weeks after he went back to school. It happened very quickly. His roommates were very concerned. They called my daughter out in California that my son was missing. They hadn't been able to find him.

And let me tell you this; they had had enough of him, too. They were living with him.

**Dr. Thomas:** That's a scary call to get. Your son is missing.

**Anita:** Thank God they made the call, though. They could have just said; you know what? We're so done with our roommate and everything. He was bringing chaos into their home, as well. But they reached out. I still didn't know enough then, instead of being really concerned I was [inaudible]. I thought, "Now what's he doing? Here it is. What is he doing now?" And I was angry.

So I kept texting him and calling him and leaving horrible messages. "Why are you doing this to me? How could you do this to our family? What's wrong with you?" I was so not educated on what addiction even was at that point. I was still learning. And I didn't get a response. He wasn't calling back, he wasn't texting back. And I always say it's by God's grace that a friend walked in the door at that exact moment.

I've told this story so many times. I'm tired of telling it myself, quite frankly. But this is what happened. She walked in the door, heard me on the phone, took the phone from my hand, and said, "You need to stop. You need to reach out to him. You don't know where he is. You need to just reinforce that you love him."

**Dr. Thomas:** Yes.

**Anita:** We had been through this before. And I listened to her, even though I didn't want to. For the first time, I took advice from someone who knew more than I did. And I reached out with love. And I did text him exactly those words.

The first time he wrote me back, he said, "Mom. No one can help me." That was probably the scariest thing ever. How do you react to that? I don't know where he is. I don't know what's going on. No one can help me.

And sure enough, at that point in time, he was in a rundown motel in Vermont, lying in an empty bathtub. He had taken what he thought was enough pills to end his life because he never thought he was going to get through it. He had his phone turned off for two days. And he turned it on right when this text came through for me. And I said, "We love you. We're here for you. Please reach out. We're here for you." And he picked up the phone and called.

He was shocked that we were still there for him. "Look. We are, but you have to be the one that wants recovery. We will come and get you now and take you to treatment. But you have to be the one. Just tell us, and we're there." And he said exactly, "I surrender. I surrender. Please come and get me. I don't want to die."

**Dr. Thomas:** Awesome. Thank you for sharing that story. I've got the tears, too. That's what it takes, folks. You have to let your person feel the pain, but be there in love so that you can be that outlet for them.

The story is so similar. People feel hopeless. They feel shame. And they stop reaching out. But if they know someone loves them, like what you just did. That's that line, that safety line that's there. It allowed him to come back and get help.

**Anita:** I think it's always the same for families in the beginning. In the beginning, it's denial. It's always the denial. This isn't happening; this can't happen in my family. My child is perfect. This is not happening. So you go through the denial.

And then when you finally realize the truth, then at least for me. I went into the next phase of the first three words, the first part, the most dangerous, "Not

my child.” And then for me, second really dangerous part. When I realized what was happening was, another three dangerous words. “Don’t tell anyone.”

**Dr. Thomas:** Secrets.

**Anita:** Secrets. Keeping those big secrets. That’s very, very dangerous. I think in the beginning and the middle it’s always the same for everyone. It’s when you turn that corner of what you choose to do. If you reach out for help, the help is everywhere. Support is everywhere, the compassion. You have to shut down. You’ve got to rise above the noise and shut down the people that don’t understand what addiction is. The people that are babbling saying, “It’s a choice. It’s a choice.” The people that don’t know.

And you know what, people are lucky to not have to understand. I can’t take that away from people that don’t. But don’t talk about things that you don’t understand.

**Dr. Thomas:** So speak to that issue of choice because people think that addicts and alcoholics are choosing to drink. They’re choosing to use. It’s all their fault.

**Anita:** Anybody; if you really think about it, it’s actually the exact opposite. And you know what; I’ll tell you this because I always will tell the truth no matter how it makes me look. I had a heart attack when I was 50 going through all of this with my son. Nicotine. I started smoking again. I know I could die. I know it’s wrong for me. It is the toughest thing I have ever had to do, trying to stop. I am continuously, continuously trying different ways to stop. And that’s how everyone needs to be out there, fighting in recovery.

The bottom line is; if you think about it really in a really simple way, for me, it’s the opposite of it being a choice. It’s actually; addiction is the absence of choice.

**Dr. Thomas:** Amen. If you’ve been addicted, and you’re far enough of that spectrum into the severe end, you’ve lost the ability to have choice because when you don’t have your substance or you don’t do your behavior that you’re doing that’s addictive, you feel so incredibly horrible withdrawal, almost like you can’t breathe. So you’re in this vicious cycle.

**Anita:** How about that it’s bad enough that people that are uneducated on this actually say those words. “It’s a choice.” How about our families of loss?

How about the people even on social media or in public wherever that will say these things to families that have lost?

**Dr. Thomas:** Oh my gosh.

**Anita:** I can't fathom what's wrong with people. To experience the worst possible pain, even more pain. Maybe silence isn't the worst thing sometimes. Those are the people that need to be silent.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yeah. We need to educate people. That's why I want you on this summit, because this is the kind of information people need to hear. I have a son who is an alcoholic. I can say that because he says it openly himself. He's been to treatment. And I remember a couple of years ago. He comes to me, and he's got a book. He says, "Dad, I found a way I think I can drink safely." He had almost two years sobriety at this point. And this is a guy that only drinks one way, and it's flat out until you're gone.

And I'm looking through this book, and it's like, "Well, you can only drink one or two drinks max. You can't get drunk. You can't drink alone." And I'm going, "You can't do any of those things." He always drank like I used to drink when I was drinking heavy; for the effect. And I said, "Why would you go back to choosing bondage? To losing choice?" Because he still had choice at that point when he was in his recovery. And he went back; and oh my word, he almost killed himself. He's thankfully recently back in recovery.

But he had lost, once again, that ability to choose. Once it takes you over if you're an addict, or you're an alcoholic, whatever your addiction is that just has you in bondage, when you break free—it's not if. You can break free. It's what your son did; he waved the flag. Surrender. That's the beginning.

So tell us more what happened after he surrendered. For him. And for you. Because it is a family disease, as you've mentioned.

**Anita:** Treatment. He went to treatment. I, of course, thought, "Ok. We're taking him to 30 days of treatment, and he'll come back all fixed and serviced." I didn't know any better. Still learning.

After his 30 days were finished, he called and said, "I'm going halfway across the country. I'm going to Sober Living." Again, mom snapped. "What do you mean? I want you back! I want you back now that you're my son. I see you now, the way you used to be. I want you back." And he said, "No, this is what I

need to do. I need to figure out how to step back into a world filled with drugs and alcohol as a sober young man. I have a lot more to learn.”

He’s like, “Mom. You’ve got to understand. This has been going on a long time. It took me a very long time to get this sick. I’m not going to be all better in 30 days. I’ll continue on and give it as much time as I need to.”

I, of course, was in the mindset of, “Oh my god, I want him to graduate college with his friends. How am I going to tell people that my son is not graduating college?” I was just so ridiculous. None of that mattered. The only thing that mattered; I know it all now. And I have this conversation with moms all the time. The only thing that’s important is the recovery, no matter how he finds it. If that way didn’t work, he would have tried another way. There are so many ways to find recovery that no matter how long it took, we would have been behind him.

We had to be who we said we were. Love him, and let him figure this out. And I’m not naïve. I don’t know what’s going to happen at 2 o’clock today. I do know that if something did happen, he has his fellowship. He has his tools. I have my tools. I’m never going to go back to being petrified because there’s no reason to be there. And that’s what we try to do now. That’s what I try to do with mothers.

**Dr. Thomas:** Speak a little more about that. Because you’re my mothers representative for this summit. What do parents; what do mothers need to do? What might you suggest they do when they’re in this very situation that you found yourself in?

**Anita:** To reach out for support; everywhere you turn there are support groups, number one. There are hundreds of thousands, if not millions of mothers online. Private groups that mothers are in. Reaching out for help. There are groups across the country. They’re everywhere. You get on, and you can speak your truth privately. And no one is really advising anyone as to where to go and what to do. That’s not what we do. We just care about each other and support one another and share our own stories and love each other.

That’s what this is about. And I think that’s really important. Anyone can go online and look into where to go for treatment. That’s all there. You can find that anywhere. It’s about wrapping your arms around somebody who is petrified even while their son or daughter is at treatment or in Sober Living or going through a different kind of program. It’s just about caring for each other.

That's all about compassion. You can find that everywhere. But a lot of times, it's through strangers. I work with moms; I get calls constantly. I get emails constantly. I can work with people who do not have sisters or brothers or mothers or fathers supporting them. Whole families are filled with that same stigma.

If you're a stranger and I'm here in New York, and I've got a mother on the phone from Ottawa, or somebody from Zimbabwe, these moms are all out together.

**Dr. Thomas:** I grew up in Zimbabwe.

**Anita:** Oh my god! Well, ok.

**Dr. Thomas:** I'm sure addiction is alive and well. In fact, I know for a fact it is.

**Anita:** But we have moms from all over the world. I love to bring as many of them together as possible to actually see each other and wrap their arms around each other.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yeah. People have to get out of their isolation. This addiction just sort of isolates you, and you shut out the world. You don't want anybody to know.

**Anita:** Absolutely. And that's all part of the shame. I was ashamed of my son when I didn't understand. I thought it was a choice, back in the beginning. Once I understood it, the only one I ended up being ashamed of was myself.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yeah, well. I think you've forgiven yourself today, right? You've worked through it.

**Anita:** You can't quite pretend. So beautiful and perfect on the outside when you open the door. And you walk into your home, and it's total chaos. It's so much torment. But outside looks great. We've all got our makeup on, and driving our nice cars, and, "Oh, my family is perfect."

**Dr. Thomas:** There probably aren't any perfect families, to be really honest, right? We've got two thirds of us are overweight or obese. This crisis of addiction affects probably at least a third of the world. When you talk about all the drugs, alcohol, and addictive behaviors.

**Anita:** I wish the media; the media is always talking about it. I wish they would turn the page and start talking about the thousands; millions. Not thousands; millions of people that are in recovery. That's where people get their hope. That's why we share our stories. That's why people talk about it out loud. It's amazing.

I've been doing this book tour off and on for three years now for our little book. I was just all week in Rhode Island last week. And I couldn't believe how many parents of loss were coming out to listen to my story of recovery. Do you know how beautiful that is?

**Dr. Thomas:** That's beautiful.

**Anita:** Families are listening, because they're out there. They've lost their babies. Where do I get the strength to stand up and talk about this? My son is in recovery. Those parents are out there helping give hope to other families. These are the people that I'm so in awe of. It's just giving of themselves all the time.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yes. And this is a real truth that we can't keep what we don't give away. I'm an alcoholic. I've got 15 years in recovery. I wasn't willing to talk about it at first. I was in so much shame, and "What about my career, my professional this and that." This addiction hits everyone. It doesn't matter if you're a doctor or you're a minimum wage worker or you're homeless and unemployed. We are all affected by addiction. But we need to talk about it so we can get rid of the shame. Come out of the closet. And start helping one another. One person helping another. It's beautiful.

**Anita:** Yes. I also think that a lot of people; some people don't want to come out and talk about it. That's their choice.

**Dr. Thomas:** True. Of course.

**Anita:** That's their choice. If you want to, you do. There is so much noise out there from people that don't understand. But there's a lot of noise going on in the recovery world, itself. My way works; your way is no good. Everyone needs to shush, right? The way you find it is no one else's business as long as you find it. Whatever works. And that's what we should all be supporting, [inaudible] this going on.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yeah. I'd be interested in your take on this, having gone through everything you've gone through. But it feels to me, from my own

experience. I also treat addicts, opioid addicts in my clinic. All of us who end up becoming addicted to something, we were trying to fill a void. An emptiness. Some kind of lack that we were feeling.

And that speaks to what you were saying. You can fill that lack in so many different ways to find your true authentic self and be able to not have to keep reaching for some artificial feel good. What are your thoughts about that?

**Anita:** My thoughts are my son's words. I can only share with you what he has told me. Because I've had this conversation with him so many times. For instance, I've said to him, "Do you ever think you'll have a beer? Do you ever think you'll have a drink?" Alcohol wasn't his problem. But, "Do you ever think you'll have another drink?" And he'll say to me, "I don't want to risk it. Why would I try?"

So we have these conversations back and forth. And that's interesting to me that he says that. I've talked to him a lot about the fact that, "You know, Mike. You always had it all going on. You were so handsome. You had all the girls. You were the athlete. You were a straight A student. You had it all going on. Why were you continuously reaching for those drugs? What was it that you were trying to take care of?"

And he said it was a void that he said, "No matter how many people I was surrounded by, no matter how popular I was, I felt empty. And I always felt alone. I could be on the bus on the way back from the game, and I could have just won that game, and everyone is cheering and screaming my name. But inside, I felt alone."

**Dr. Thomas:** Yep.

**Anita:** And he said; my son found his recovery through a 12-step program. That worked for him. I grew up with a father as a priest. My religion was what was taught to me by my father. But my faith is what I found through my son's recovery. It's a whole different world. Faith in my family. Faith in myself. Faith in my son. You really have to have some kind of a faith to hold onto. You have to let go of that fear and hold onto faith.

So when he talks to me about this; I'll talk about something right now that I don't even know if you want me talking about this on your summit. Because God forbid anyone talks about God anymore.

**Dr. Thomas:** Go ahead.

**Anita:** I don't care what anyone says, I'll talk about what I want.

**Dr. Thomas:** That's right.

**Anita:** And anybody else can talk about whatever they want, too. My son's faith in God; I never saw this in him growing up with a grandfather for a priest and going to church. But going through his recovery, what he has found in his spirituality is so intense that I've learned so much on my own from the way he talks to me about it now. And he'll say to me; I'll say, "How do you feel since you said you always felt so alone? How do you stay in your recovery? What do you?" and he says, "Because as long as I have my God, I'm never alone, Mom."

It's just really simple the way he says it. And that's great that works for him. And whoever it works for, that's wonderful. I also feel the same thing. We went through a lot of things at the same time [inaudible]. The financial crisis hit us. We lost our jobs, we lost our home. Everything happened at once. Our worlds fell apart. And my son walked into treatment.

**Dr. Thomas:** Wow.

**Anita:** Petrified? Yeah. I felt like my son. And like a lot of moms when I get up and speak now. I don't just speak about my son's journey. I speak about my own. And that darkness. A lot of darkness that I was feeling. Like he was feeling. I just always tell moms; you have to find something to reach through that darkness. A little glimmer of light, and reach for that light. Whether it's your faith, no matter what it is. For me, it was my faith. And for my son, that's how it happened.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yep.

**Anita:** It's a beautiful story. It's my story. And it's the only story I know.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yep. Folks, if you are struggling with this God thing, you can let the word or your concept of it. Let it go. What they teach in the 12-step programs, it's a god of your own understanding. And that's what your son found. I grew up in the church; missionary kid. So we have that in common. Mine go back generations. I was supposed to be a preacher. I chose to be a doctor.

That God that was in my heritage and my genes. I was in the church growing up every Sunday. Hours, we're talking. And it wasn't even; some churches are, "You're going to hell." I had some of that along the way. But for the most part,

it was a very sort of community, good experience. But I never found that deep personal relationship that I found going to a 12-step and having it be a god of my own understanding.

So, it's a spiritual thing that we're talking about here. And you can get it in church, as you did. You can get it in a 12-step program, as your son and I did. And you can get it lots of places. This is the fact that the amazing world we live in; this is available to everyone. But it's important, isn't it? That's sort of one of those keys.

**Anita:** It's important. And you know what has happened; I speak for a lot of different denominations now. The priest's daughter, out there talking about addiction. But, what's happened is even my own church, and I'm Greek Orthodox, has embraced it. And I have all these wonderful young priests and bishops that are reaching out. Armenian church. Presbyterian church. And I go and speak with the clergy.

And they'll understand about all the judgment that goes on in church. And how they can start. They want to know, "How do we help? How do we reach out and help anyone who is struggling?" And I always say to them, "I think it's not so much about—generations are different now. It's not so much about how to get them to church. It's about, how do we follow them out to the streets and live simply like the stories of Jesus, right? And follow them out and be the way they want to be. That's how you get everyone to come back in, and to be there. It's not about filling pews. It's about compassion and working together. And bringing everyone together and offering something."

It's important. And I'm really stoked that a lot of the clergy, higher ups, are up there talking about it now and reaching out and trying; everyone needs to come together. Because if you don't start coming together to offer compassion and help and guidance; for yourself to understand and to help other families, you're going to be left all alone. You're going to be at church, and turn around on the altar, and there's going to be no one there.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yeah. So it's compassion, not judgment, as you say. My experience, and I'm wondering if yours was the same. I had to completely; I was a fixer, too. So you were that parent who; I'm fixing everything. I grew up in the church with a dad and a mom both who couldn't—there wasn't a problem they couldn't solve. So we were fixers. We could solve anything. But I couldn't fix my own addiction. You couldn't fix your son's addiction.

I had to surrender. I had to absolutely be brought to my knees. Which is sort of biblical, and what we grew up with, right. That's what it takes. And for each person out there, it's going to take what it takes to wave the flag, like your son did. It sounds like you waved your own flag in a way.

**Anita:** I surrendered.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yep.

**Anita:** Nothing else mattered to me anymore. I mean, I've never honestly really much cared what people have thought about me. I've always had a big mouth. Now, I have a purpose for it. I was the rebel, radical, priest's kid. And I now have a purpose for it. I never thought that this would ever be a part of my daily conversations. I never thought I'd be talking about any of this.

People say to me, "Why do you do this? Your son has been in recovery for so long. Why don't you move on from it?" and I say, "Because it's not about me. And it's not about my son." It's about the mother that calls me at 2 in the morning. Or the one that shows up on my door and wants to have a cup of coffee and talk. It's about starting support groups. It's about understanding what helped me get through it that I can't keep what you don't give away. That's right.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yeah.

**Anita:** And so I give that to other moms. That's all it's about. I have no agenda. It's not about politics. It's not about anything else other than helping another mother get through this.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yeah.

**Anita:** People need to understand it's ok to love yourself. And if you take; I have a friend who is a yoga instructor who went through this with four of her sons at the same time, and battling breast cancer. I went to her yoga class; I said, "I'm too fat to yoga." She's like, "No, you have to come do this." And at the end of the session, there were probably 12 of us in that room whose kids have gone through what I've gone through. And at the end of the session she had us sit there.

And she said, "I want you all now take your arms, close your eyes, and wrap your arms around yourselves. Close your eyes. Feel your heart. Feel the love. Love yourself. Squeeze yourself. Hold yourself as tight as you can." And even

when I do it now; I'm trying not to be a blubbering fool. But when it was over, and she told us to open our eyes, I was afraid to because I was crying so hard I was soaked. I opened my eyes. We all looked at each other, and all of us were crying.

**Dr. Thomas:** Bawling.

**Anita:** Right. It's really important to learn. It's ok to love yourself.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yes.

**Anita:** While your child is going through this, take care of yourself.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yes. Self-care is so important. When I was in my addiction, I couldn't even look at myself in the mirror. I didn't like what I saw. So if you're struggling and wondering, am I an addict? Go look in the mirror and say, "I love you. I'm happy with everything you're doing. Keep doing exactly what you're doing." And if you can't do that, there's a need for that change. That self-love. Wave the flag.

Recovery is, we say, a day at a time. But I just love the way you're doing it for life. This is a journey, and you're not veering from the path that you've been given to help so many people.

**Anita:** It feels good.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yeah. You have a little story. I think I heard you sharing about when addiction enters your world. There was something about an octopus.

**Anita:** I'm a producer at heart. I love having a visual when I talk about something. And when people don't quite understand what addiction is, I give them a visual. Envision an octopus. It's slimy, tentacles with arms that shoot out in the family. It's how addiction is a family disease. And it reaches out so far. Well beyond mom and dad and brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles cousins and friends, everybody. And just strangles you. Sucks the life out of everyone.

That's what I picture addiction being. And when we talk about shame, and judgment and stigma that's exactly what the octopus wants. That's what nurtures it. When you cut all of that off, that's the way you kill this hidden disease and fight this disease.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yeah. Get rid of shame. Get rid of secrets. No more lies. Tell people, right?

**Anita:** Judgment.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yeah. So how should we help others? You're doing it. But for our audience, they're just getting started now. They're starting to wake up. Either it's in their family, it's in their loved ones, or they just want to help. What can people do?

**Anita:** The first thing you do is go to the bookstore. And get your hands on every single book that you can read about addiction. No matter where it's coming from. What you're doing, the way that you write about it. Doctors, therapists, neurologists. And family stories. Because when you start reading it all and making sense to understand it, then you can. You have to educate yourself. Really important.

Once you child goes to treatment, you have to become part. You have to do the work while they're there as a family to understand what they're going through. Because when your child comes out; whether it's Sober Living, no matter what they do for how long it takes. You're a team. You all have to be on the same page. It's a family disease. The family has to recover together.

It's going to be really difficult for your child or your husband, wife, whoever it is, to get past it if you're not all on the same page. You have to work together. That's where the strength comes from.

**Dr. Thomas:** So what if I'm one of those parents who thinks, "I don't have a problem. It's them. My son, my daughter, this person, or that person."

**Anita:** Oh, I thought that. In the beginning, somebody said to me that I needed to get out of this, and I needed to get out of that. And I said, "Why? It's not my problem." That's typical.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yeah.

**Anita:** Talk to people who understand it, who have been through it. That's where you get that knowledge. So you don't make that mistake. You're going to lose precious time. And all you're going to do as a parent is hurt your child. Almost everyone has the family programs now. They're everywhere [inaudible] support groups.

Get up, and go put in the time. Whether it's an hour a week, you have to go and do this if you want things to get better. You can't sit there and be that armchair quarterback parent and say, "Yeah, my kid is off doing what they need to be doing. It'll be fine." When you don't even understand what they're going through.

**Dr. Thomas:** Right. Tell me. How's your son, Mike, doing now?

**Anita:** He's good. He got married last year. A little over a year ago. I'm going to be a grandmother in June. They've got a baby on the way.

**Dr. Thomas:** That's exciting.

**Anita:** He's good. He's still in Dallas, where he went to Sober Living. [inaudible] He came back to New York for a while. This was a long time ago. I started seeing it before he even told us that he needed to go back and be around all these guys that he went through everything with. They're all still out there. He's got an incredible support group. He works for a company now coding, building websites. I think almost all the boys that work there are in recovery. They work together every day. He's gone back to that sport where all the problems started as a coach.

**Dr. Thomas:** Coaching lacrosse?

**Anita:** Yeah. Fifth grade and high school.

**Dr. Thomas:** Nice.

**Anita:** Out there this weekend for a huge tournament. He loves it. These kids are calling him Coach Dev. Absolutely loves it. And he still works with the boys that go through that Sober House that he was at, helping whoever needs guidance.

**Dr. Thomas:** Working with others.

**Anita:** Giving of himself.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yep. Working with others. That's beautiful. What do they say? You can't keep what you don't give away.

**Anita:** Yeah, Paul, you know what? We're talking about my son. Do you have any other children?

**Dr. Thomas:** I have 9 or 10 depending on how you count.

**Anita:** I've only got one; my daughter, one other child. But I think it's something else that parents really, really need to understand. Those other siblings, that they need to focus on.

**Dr. Thomas:** Yep.

**Anita:** Brothers and sisters. I know I wasn't paying any attention to my daughter through all of this. Everything was about my son. What she was going through; job promotions. Everything beautiful happening in her life. She would try to talk to me about it, and I would say, "That's nice. Have you talked to your brother today? [inaudible] your brother." I wasn't even aware that I was doing it.

So my big advice to parents is always, when you go for any kind of therapy, bring in your other siblings. They're as much of a part of your family and that child's recovery. They have to go through it themselves. Embrace them. Don't go thinking it's not affecting them.

**Dr. Thomas:** Right. As a parent of many children, my wife and I would often sort of tease back and forth that our happiness was to the level of the child that was having the most trouble because with that many, there's always somebody struggling. And that seems to be what takes all your energy.

So parents out there, if you have someone who is struggling, of course you love them, you support them. But like you just said; don't forget the rest of the family. And don't forget yourself. Self-care is vital. You lost yourself in his world of swirl of addiction. I know I lost myself in some of the stuff that was going on around me.

That might be a nice sort of wrap-up. Some self-care advice. What final tips would you like to leave our audience?

**Anita:** All I can say to anyone is, if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything. These are not; I hate the word addict. I don't even use it anymore. These aren't addicts that are dying. They are sons and daughters. And you have to have compassion. That's all that I ever really want to talk about. Compassion and caring for somebody else.

And you don't know what people are struggling. And if someone might not be talking about it. Someone might not be bringing it to your attention. None of

us know. Everyone is struggling through something right now. We all need to be quiet and just care for each other.

One other thing; when we talk about families that have lost, I have a lot of friends. A lot of people that I know that have suffered who have lost the war, and lost a child. And I always ask them; "What is it that makes you feel better, if anything?" They say, "When people talk to us about our children. Say my son's name. Tell me a story. Remember this. Talk to me about my daughter. Say her name. Don't not say anything. Even if you're uncomfortable."

Comfort zones are a beautiful place. But nothing ever grows there. You have to step out of your comfort zone. Go to someone and talk to them about their child. Take them for a cup of coffee. Say, "Is there anything I can do for you? Can I go do your grocery shopping?" Anything that's going to take a little bit of pressure off of them. Just give them a hug. Squeeze them as tight as you can. Just be there. Be aware and offer something of yourself. Even if it makes you uncomfortable.

**Dr. Thomas:** That's beautiful. Everybody suffers loss. Everybody has hurts. But some of them, when they're in your life, that advice you just gave is key. Reach out. They do want you to talk about it. It's hard to do. So we avoid it. But I love your call to action, call to compassion. Thank you Anita, so much for your message of hope. How can people get a hold of you, if that's even an option? I know your book is available.

**Anita:** I have my own website, AnitaDevlin.com. We have all kinds of videos, the book. All kinds of things there. I also, a few months ago, was asked to become the executive director of a brand-new foundation called Above the Noise. That's why I say above the noise a lot, because it makes sense. And it's a foundation that we have actually an incredible advisory board, and there are four of us, all moms. All of us have been affected, not by the epidemic, by addiction, period. Maybe it's because we're all mothers. But all we are about is what I'm talking about.

We're putting on music festivals for people to come where no alcohol will be served. I don't want to say they're sober music festivals. There just won't be alcohol served. Music festivals to bring people together. Those who are still suffering. Those who are in recovery. Families of loss who want to go all the way through all genres of music. All demographics. Bringing people together. A no judgment zone. A lot of healing can happen through music. And bringing people together, just to rise above the noise and listen to the music and care about each other. It's pretty cool.

You can also go to AbovetheNoiseFoundation.org. All we will be raising money for is to share. To be able to sprinkle around the world to very small nonprofits, grassroots organizations. That's who we'd like to help all over the country.

**Dr. Thomas:** Wonderful. Thank you, Anita. You are sure an advocate for mothers. You're an advocate for this whole recovery journey. The whole movement to get us all connected and get us becoming real and healing. This message of hope you're sharing is going to reach a lot of people. Thank you for your time today.

**Anita:** Thank you so much for having me.