

Carrying On A Legacy

An Interview with Carmela Wallace, Founder, Live Free 999

EDITORS' NOTE Carmela Wallace loved challenging her son, Jarad Higgins, to games of pinball. As a mom she had to pick her battles, one of those being between having her son perform in the school band or allowing him to pursue a music career. He would sneak off in the afternoon to go to the studio and once found his mom waiting for him. She supported his passion by allowing him to continue to record in the studio and pursue his music career and gave him a gap year to make his dreams a reality. His



Carmela Wallace

career took off, and Carmela would leave her job in quality management to help manage his stratospheric success – though she declined to call him Juice WRLD. Carmela founded Live Free 999 as a mother who lost her son to a drug overdose. She was overwhelmed by the outpouring of love following Jared's death. His music influenced so many lives, particularly young people, and she hopes to continue his legacy through Live Free 999. She believes that if she can prevent even one mother from experiencing such a tragic loss, she will have succeeded. Helping others is a part of her healing. Carmela and Jared shared a close relationship, free from judgment, that allowed him to talk openly about his mental health struggles and addiction. She hopes Live Free 999 will remove the stigma and normalize conversations about mental health and substance abuse. Her goal is to ensure that no parent or loved one faces what she faced.

FOUNDATION BRIEF Live Free 999 (livefree999.org) was founded by Carmela Wallace to honor her son Jarad "Juice WRLD" Higgins. Wallace was inspired to name the foundation Live Free 999 after finding a photo of Jarad wearing a denim jacket he bought from a thrift store; on the back of the jacket, he'd painted "Live Free." Through financial grants and partnerships, Live Free 999's mission is to support programs that compassionately and successfully address addiction, anxiety and depression, while normalizing the conversation around these issues. Beyond offering financial support, Live Free 999 is focused on continuing the conversation around mental health and addiction. Live Free 999 is a fund of the Entertainment Industry Foundation (EIF), a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization. EIF is a Charity Navigator Four-Star Charity that meets all 20 Better Business Bureau charity standards and carries the Candid Platinum Seal of Transparency.

Will you discuss your career journey?

My background is in quality assurance where I worked in various industries, including manufacturing and construction. The final position that I held was in the utility industry where I worked until January 2019, at which time I left to manage my son, Jarad's, affairs. I have an MBA with a major in project management. I never imagined using my skills and experience in this way. Fame and success came very quickly for him, and I wanted to remain close to him and protect him as much as possible.

What was your vision for creating Live Free 999?

I remember the moment I decided to do something. It came from reading messages from Jarad's fans – the outpouring about how his music helped them cope with anxiety and depression; thankfully, some even said it helped prevent them from committing suicide. According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 19.7 million Americans (12 and older) battled a substance disorder in 2017. I felt that there was a void and something needed to be done, so I founded Live Free 999 in Jarad's memory. I was originally going to call it the Jarad Higgins Foundation, but I wanted to name it something that was more lively and that would fit him. I was looking at old photos from a vacation, and when I saw the photo of him in a denim jacket, with "Live Free" painted on the back, I knew that was the right name for the foundation. Jarad had created 999 to be the opposite of 666 to "turn all the

hell around," so I thought it was perfect. The name Live Free 999 came from Jarad.

How do you describe the mission of Live Free 999?

Our mission is to normalize the conversation around mental health and substance dependency and to let people know that they are not alone. My goal is for no one to suffer in silence. We provide outlets for people to receive help and human connection, such as our partnership with Crisis Text Line that offers a texting service allowing people to reach out and get immediate help when they feel that they need to talk to someone and are alone while going through a crisis. They can text LF999 to 741741, and they will be immediately connected with someone who will help them and talk them through whatever they are going through.

We are focused on keeping the conversation going, which is why we feature individuals sharing their stories on the Live Free website. The conversations share stories of triumphs, struggles, and offer encouragement and hope to those who are facing challenges. It is important to hear from others who have been where you are and are on the other side of it. The only way to normalize the conversation around mental health is to have the conversation.

We support organizations that have proven methods in place that work. We give grants to those that are aligned with the mission of Live Free 999, and we are focused on continuing to build our presence and impact.

What do you feel made your son's music connect to so many people?

I think Jarad's music connected with so many people because he was so in touch with his feelings and was just honest. His emotional honesty – he put it all out there – and people feel that someone was able to express and communicate the way they themselves were feeling. Jarad's music resonated with them and made them feel better and that they were not alone. Jarad's willingness to be open and transparent about his struggles helped others deal with their anxiety and depression. I think it broke a barrier and made them feel that someone understood how they were feeling.

You have said that "Juice WRLD touched the world, but Jarad was my son." What do you want the world to know about Jarad "Juice WRLD" Higgins?

I raised my son to see people. I raised him to pay attention, and he did that through his music. He saw people; he touched people; he let them know they were not alone; and he truly cared about people. He always wanted to leave a lasting impression. ●

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Carmela Wallace and her son, Jarad "Juice WRLD" Higgins

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