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## It's Corporate Greed': Activists Turn To Art To Protest Big Pharma And Opioid Epidemic

09:44 Updated February 07, 2019

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Patrick Lynch, left, a metal fabricator working on one of the buildings being erected in the Seaport, takes a photo of the 800-pound, 11-foot-long steel spoon as he passes by District Hall on his way home. He says he is currently in recovery for opioid addiction and thinks it's great the conference is happening and people are talking about the issue. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

Patrick Lynch, left, a metal fabricator working on one of the buildings being erected in the Seaport, takes a photo of the 800-pound, 11-foot-long steel spoon as he passes by District Hall on his way home. He says he is currently in recovery for opioid addiction and thinks it's great the conference is happening and people are talking about the issue. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

"I think there really is culpability here with Big Pharma. At the end of the day, really what it is, it's corporate greed," Esposito tells *Here & Now's* Robin Young.

He says the spoon — burnt at its center as if it had been used to cook drugs for injection — symbolizes the hardships that people addicted to drugs endure along with their families. And although the piece is large and shiny, it's not intended to be a "beautiful thing."

"In fact, [the spoon is] a dark, macabre symbol for me and my family, and for a lot of families out there, that have found these burnt spoons all over their house. And that's the symbolism behind it," Esposito says. "We're using that as art to really show that you're not alone, and there's people out there that have purposely created this epidemic."

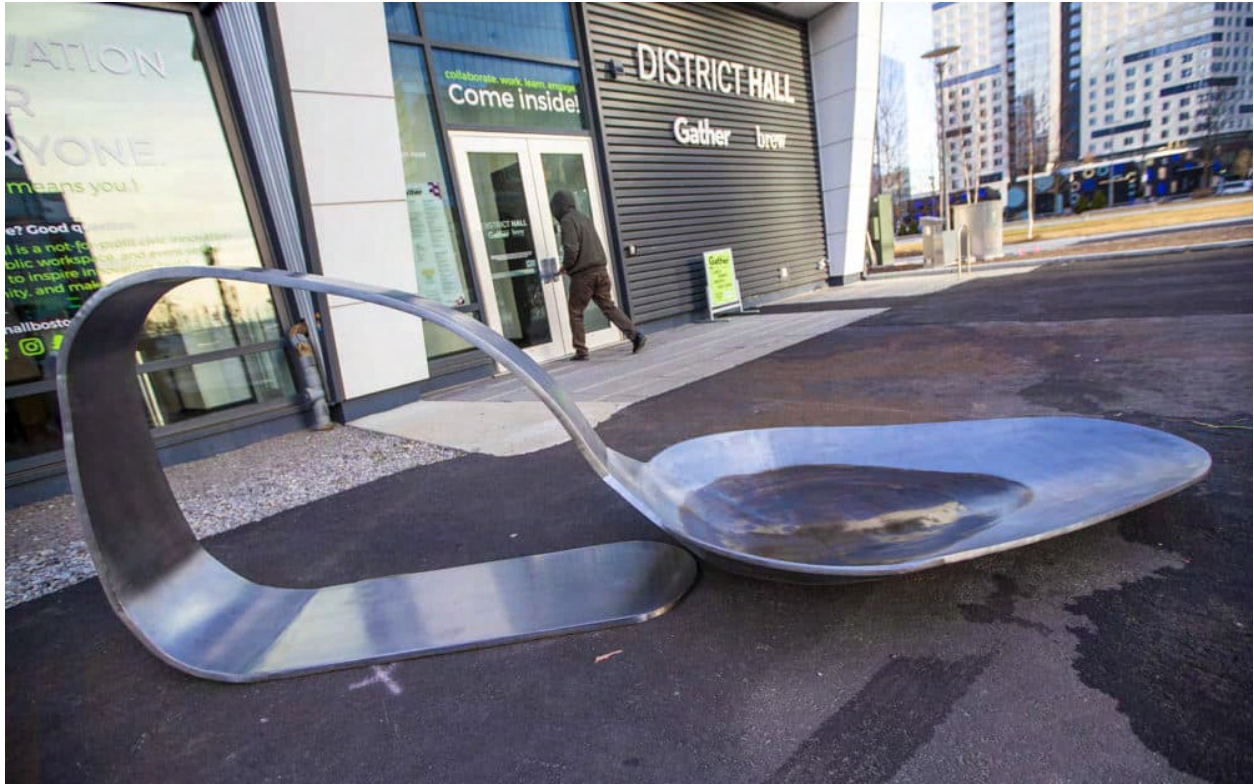
Esposito stresses he wants to hold Big Pharma accountable — a goal that many people are also trying to accomplish in court.

A federal trial is underway in Boston against Arizona-based Insys Therapeutics Inc., which allegedly paid bribes and kickbacks to physicians in a nationwide racketeering conspiracy. The company also allegedly pressured doctors to prescribe a drug called Subsys — a fentanyl spray for cancer patients — to people without cancer.

In Cleveland, a judge has his work cut out for him working on a multidistrict litigation, which consolidates large numbers of similar cases. Judge Dan Aaron Polster is working through nearly 1,600 federal lawsuits targeting drugmakers and companies.

Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey is suing Purdue Pharma for pushing the prescription painkiller OxyContin on doctors, and allegedly profiting from it as the opioid crisis progressed. Back in 2007, the company agreed to a multimillion-dollar settlement and three executives at Purdue pleaded guilty to misbranding and misrepresenting OxyContin.

In the current lawsuit, the Sackler family — the owners of Purdue Pharma — are accused of being aware that OxyContin had dangerous qualities. The Sackler family in response blamed users for becoming addicted.



The 800-pound, 11-foot-long steel spoon created by artist Domenic Esposito outside in front of District Hall in the Seaport. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

## **Interview Highlights**

### **On why he chose the spoon to represent the opioid epidemic**

"Well, not a lot of people know that 80 percent of heroin users will actually admit to having started on some sort of oxy, on some sort of synthetic opiate. So that's the connection is here, you have this spoon that you can also cook pills in and but are typically used for heroin."

### **On seeing his brother struggle with drug addiction**

"My brother has been dealing with [addiction] for about 12 years now, and it's something that not only affects him, it affects the entire family. And part of the equation is his relapse is back and forth, you know, on average people relapse 10 or 12 times. My brother's about there, about 10 or 12 times, and it really kind of takes the whole family with it."

### **On pharmaceutical companies blaming people who use drugs for their own addiction**

"That's further stigmatizing what's already out there. This is a whole marketing scheme. You know, the fifth vital sign was just invented in 1995 ... before then, what did we do as a society with pain? How did we deal with this? So now you have countless other families [that have] just been completely ruined."

### **On families financially connected Big Pharma funding the arts**

"It's actually kind of ironic that now we're using art. ... Yes, they've received a lot of funding from Purdue Pharma and the profits that they've made. So we would love for museums and endowments in some of these foundations to reconsider their gifting policy. And we've also seen some museums start to think about it."

### **On the Opioid Epidemic Accountability Conference, held in Boston**

"The conference was great because we brought together a lot of heads of different organizations around the U.S. We're really about one thing, and that is really showing accountability. This is the first really, I think, the first national effort of doing this and we've had some great discussions around coming in 2020. How do we make sure this is a top agenda item, which it's not, which is incredible."

### **On holding Big Pharma accountable**

"I will say, you know, seven or eight months ago when we dropped the first spoon and I'd always talk about jail time. That's what we want, and people would laugh at me, they're like, 'Domenic, that sounds crazy.' And you fast forward seven or eight months, now people are talking about, 'You know, I want to get these guys in jail. How do we get them in jail?' It's really important that someone does go to jail here, because the moral hazard of letting things like this continue, the pay to play attitude, really needs to end. So as crazy as it sounds, we really need to make an example here of some of these corporate criminals."

*Ciku Theuri produced this interview and edited it for broadcast with Kathleen McKenna. Serena McMahon adapted it for the web.*

*This article was originally published on February 05, 2019.*

*This segment aired on February 5, 2019.*