

Heroin in our communities: A new urgency

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Last Modified: Oct 16, 2011 02:32AM

While the exact date is not as clear, the memory of that night has become no less vivid over the years.

It was sometime after February 2009 that Karen Hanneman, shreds of wilted Kleenex blanketing the furniture, sat in the family room of her Naperville home with a trio of sobbing mothers.

All three had buried their sons in the last couple of years. All the deaths were tied to heroin.

And Hanneman knew that, without some sort of intervention — divine or maternal — her son Justin would be next.

The young men, only a few years out of high school, were friends. They all had families who loved them. And bright futures awaited — except for one thing: They were also addicts. And Hanneman was desperate to find some clues, some answers from these grieving mothers' nightmares that would prevent her from experiencing their fate.

"I felt like I was driving 90 mph into a brick wall," said Hanneman, "and I needed to know what to do to stop it."

Her attempts were futile. On Jan. 15 of this year, her son died of an overdose at a small business office in the Wheatland Township. Emergency crews from Naperville and Oswego responded to the call, but 21-year-old Justin Tokar became yet another statistic added to the already long list of heroin-related deaths in our communities.

As much as the family tried, Hanneman says, she could not pull her son back from the grips of his addiction. He had been seeking help in a faith-based live-in ministry in St. Charles just a couple of months before his death, but she knew it takes an average of seven attempts for treatment to stick. Part of the ugliness of heroin is the quick and powerful pull it has on those unfortunate enough to try it.

Hanneman knows a lot about heroin now. Since Justin's death, she has thrown her life into fighting the drug. She's doing her research, meeting with experts and officials. And when other kids die, as they have done in alarming numbers as of late, she reaches out to their parents.

Some take her calls and welcome her into their nightmare. Some ignore her outreach, their pain and denial so evident.

But Hanneman doesn't stop there. She's also working with legislators on passage of Senate Bill 1701 that would provide limited immunity from drug-related charges when calling for emergency help in overdose situations. She often wonders if her son would still be alive today if the people he had been with had called 911 immediately.

Hanneman also is working closely with a group from Santa Clarita, Calif., heroinkills.org, who have seen a similar epidemic and are fighting back with every resource in their community.

She knows it will take a similar push here.

Which is why she's prepared to go before city councils and school administrators to talk about what experts continue to label "an epidemic." It's the reason she'll be attending a program on heroin abuse Monday night at Naperville's St. Raphael Catholic Church. It's the reason she sits on the family committee of the Robert Crown Center, which will be co-sponsoring a Community Forum on Heroin Tuesday in Downers Grove.

Heroin has been around for a long time. But there's a new sense of urgency out there, experts say, because the drug has never been this potent. It's never been this cheap. It's never been this easy to buy.

And it's never killed so many.

"Sometimes I think I've bitten off more than I can chew," Hanneman says of her ongoing mission. "But I have to keep going ... if it prevents one person from dying, it will all be worth it."

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Hanneman's sentiments are echoed by the Burr Ridge family of Reed Hruby, who died of an overdose in 2008 at the age of 24. In response, his grandparents, Roger and Nadeane Hruby, donated \$340,000 to form the Reed Hruby Heroin Prevention Project with the goal of stopping the growing trend. In conjunction with Roosevelt University, the ground-breaking information from that effort will be discussed Tuesday at the Robert Crown forum that is co-sponsored with state Rep. Patti Bellock and the DuPage Regional Office of Education.

Among the panel members will be Laurel Mateyka, whose perspective includes coming from a family with a background of drug abuse. But she's also a parent of teenagers herself, as well as assistant principal at Plano High School.

More than ever, Mateyka sees young people under intense pressure to be perfect, to fit in. Unfortunately, at an age already fraught with developmental land mines, she says, young people “are often ill-prepared to handle adversity.”

Schools need to start much earlier in helping students develop coping skills, Mateyka insists. Likewise, parents need to start having these conversations much earlier with their children about how to deal with pressure.

“I hate to lay the guilt on the parents,” she said, “but they are the first teachers.”

Her hope is that this forum “will get the conversation started” so we can concentrate less on reaction and more on prevention. All you have to do is Google “heroin overdose” and narrow your search to the past week to see how rampant this problem is nationwide. And all you have to do is read the local statistics to see why there is a sense of urgency. In Illinois, heroin use has increased 320 percent over the past decade, and is now the second most common drug after alcohol for which people enter treatment.

Here in the suburbs, there’s been a 313 percent rise in treatment, and hospital discharges for heroin abuse have risen 200 percent. Will County registered 26 heroin-related deaths in 2010; so far this year, the heroin death toll in Will is 21. And in its drug court, 32 percent of the clients reveal that heroin is their primary addiction.

If you go by the list of names compiled by concerned watchdogs, heroin could be responsible for as many as 14 young lives lost in the last few years in Naperville, which has been hit particularly hard. Yet police in towns as small as Sugar Grove now say they are seeing more heroin than ever. And while cocaine and marijuana top the drug list in Elgin, this last July, the city was the scene of one of the biggest heroin busts in years.

Aurora Police Chief Greg Thomas describes the problem as cyclical. “A couple years ago we started seeing an increase,” he said. “Generationally, it comes back, and we are in the middle of it right now.” But because the drug is now so cheap and provides such a strong high, he added, its effects are “addictive and devastating.”

No one knows that more than those who have lost loved ones.

“I have to speak out because other people can’t,” Hanneman said. “It was too late for my child, but that doesn’t mean other deaths can’t be prevented.”

The first step, she suggested, is to click online at www.Drugfree.org, which discusses how parents should talk to kids about drugs and how to approach them if you think they’re using.

Kimberly Groll — who has given presentations on heroin at North Central College, and will volunteer her time again Tuesday at St. Raphael Church — didn’t lose a child to the drug. But as an addictions counselor, she sees the fears and tears up close.

“We are losing too many young people,” she said. “It’s time for all of us to do more.”

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