

ATTACKING THE PROBLEM - WITH TWO FRIENDS DEAD, 'GOOD KID' ENTERS REHAB, FINDS HOPE FOR FUTURE

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- Author/Byline: David Wecker, Post staff reporter
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When one of Stacey's close friends died last fall of a drug overdose, her reaction was "to go out and get high to numb the pain."

So when heroin killed another close friend in the winter, friends and family hid the fact from her for two months. By that time, Stacey was in rehab herself, and they didn't want anything to divert her from the program.

"It was devastating," said Stacey, 17, about finally finding out last month about her 18-year-old friend's death. "But right away, I stood up in group and talked about it. And that night when I went home, I hugged my Dad for the longest time. I never would have done that before."

Stacey, so far at least, is considered one of the success stories in a community's efforts to fight an outbreak of heroin use.

Heroin, once considered a "dirty" inner-city drug used primarily by hard-core junkies in dark alleys, has gradually become more popular among a younger crowd, with dangerous results. Coroners concluded earlier this year that heroin overdoses killed as many as eight people in Campbell and Kenton counties in a year's time.

In many ways, it's just a national trend: The extremely addictive drug has become cheaper to buy, easier to find and more pure. Its use is way up, especially among youth.

But in rural Campbell County, the concern -- and use -- is especially great.

About 450 people attended a public meeting Feb. 5 to talk about heroin and its hold on the community. The uproar has died down, but a core group of a dozen parents have formed a local chapter of the national group Residents Attacking Drugs as a way to define, understand and solve the problem.

Informational meetings have been held at Campbell County and Bishop Brossart high schools, and another meeting is set for 7:15 p.m. May 5 at Bishop Brossart.

"Our goal right now is to keep the focus on educating the public and increasing awareness," said Pam Kinney, a volunteer coordinator at St. Luke Hospital.

Subcommittees are being established to work on legislative issues and to explore ways to work with insurance carriers to provide more effective drug treatment plans for teens and young adults.

Alexandria Police Chief Mike Ward, who convened the first public meetings, said the parents group has helped police form 11 separate neighborhood block watch groups.

"Parents are arming themselves with more and better information than they had before," he said. "The feedback we're getting from the kids who will talk to us has been, 'Geez, I can't even go to the mall without Mom or Dad asking me 50 million questions about where I'm going and who I'm going with.' That's what we need to get back to. I think what we're seeing now is just an awakening."

Some drug treatment agencies also have stepped up publicity efforts to make sure the community is aware of their services.

One of those is North Key, which operates one of a small group of drug and alcohol rehab programs for adolescents in Greater Cincinnati. North Key opened a Falmouth office nine months ago as a pilot program and is primarily aimed at serving teens in rural Pendleton and Grant counties. Thirteen teens are enrolled in the program, generally referrals either from their schools or the Kentucky Department of Juvenile Justice.

Another is Kids Helping Kids, a Milford, Ohio-based long-term drug and alcohol rehab for younger users.

It was Kids Helping Kids to which Stacey turned when her drug problem got too great.

Stacey, whose full name isn't being given because of her age, said she checked into Kids Helping Kids last November because she knew the odds seemed against her living to see her 18th birthday.

A month earlier, one of her best "druggie" friends, as she puts it now, 19-year-old Mark DeMarrero, was found dead at his parents' home in rural Melbourne of a suspected OxyContin overdose. DeMarrero had a history of heroin abuse.

Stacey got high to ease the shock and pain.

Then another in her close circle of friends, 18-year-old Adam Messmer of Alexandria, was found unconscious in a parking lot in Fort Thomas, near death from a heroin overdose.

Realizing it was only a matter of time for her, too, Stacey dug out the phone number for Kids Helping Kids passed along by her mother's insurance company.

A week later, she entered the program.

More than 1,100 kids have been through the program since it began in 1981. The commitment required is considerable, both on the part of clients and their families; the treatment costs \$19,500 and takes 11 to 12 months to complete.

But the success rate is impressive.

Kids Helping Kids says studies of its graduates -- done by independent market research firms -- in 24-month increments show that 70 percent maintain a drug-free lifestyle, report improved relationships with parents and peers and, overall, lead productive lives.

It's worth noting, too, that nine of 10 kids that check in don't come willingly. Their parents tell them they're going to the mall or picking up something to eat or just taking a ride. Instead, they arrive at a squat brick building with lockdown security and a 10-foot chain link fence -- a place with all the warmth and personality of a barracks.

For Stacey, it was a different story. She wanted to come here.

* * *

At its core, Kids Helping Kids is what its name suggests. The clients work on each other, through a sort of hierarchy provided by a five-phase program.

At the same time, they're put in a rigorously structured environment, stripped of their privileges and, bit by bit, given opportunities to earn them back.

In the first phase, which generally takes 10 to 14 weeks to complete, newcomer clients don't go to their own homes in the evening. Instead, they spend the night at the home of a client who has achieved the second phase or higher.

"Obviously, parents have to make a big commitment," said Penny Walker, director of Kids Helping Kids. "They have to agree to provide a safe, secure home for other kids when their kids enter treatment."

The idea, in part, is to keep the client in a family-type environment while removing them from settings that contributed to their problem in the first place.

Indeed, Stacey said one of the reasons she was drawn to Kids Helping Kids is that "I needed to go someplace away from where I was having trouble."

Said Ms. Walker, "It's also important in that a big part of how kids progress through the program is through modeling from kids who are farther along in treatment.

"It gives new clients a chance to see a more advanced client interact more appropriately with his or her parents."

In the second phase, as in the first, clients spend nearly 11 hours during the day in group sessions, one after another. They're also allowed to spend the night at their parents' home and are given responsibility for the newcomers who go home with them.

"The goal in the second phase is to work on family relationships," Ms. Walker said.

It takes most clients another month to advance to the third phase. At this point, they go to school or to a job during the day, report back to the program in the afternoons and evenings and, by 8 p.m., return to their homes -- along with any newcomers assigned to them.

In the fourth phase, a client is given time away from the program.

"These are kids who were out of control when they came here," she added.

"By the time they're in phase four, they've developed coping skills, they've learned to think things through and they understand the

concept that their actions have consequences."

Clients gradually are allowed more and more time away from the center in phase five.

"We relax some of the structure, and they focus on giving back -- to new clients, to the community, to doing speaking engagements for youth groups," Ms. Walker said.

Stacey is in the fourth phase, which takes a minimum of 91 days to get through. She's attending classes at Milford High and planning to graduate this year.

April 20 marked her fifth month of sobriety.

Said Stacey's mother: "I don't know if we'd still have our daughter if it weren't for Kids Helping Kids."

* * *

Stacey first smoked marijuana as a seventh grader. It was available, everyone else was doing it, and she was curious.

As a junior, she was on a Campbell County High School cheerleading squad that placed fifth in the nationals at Disney World. She dressed like a preppie and acted like a preppie.

Like Mark DeMarrero and Adam Messmer, she came from a loving home with two parents who supported her and believed in her.

The last thing they would have imagined was that she was a heroin addict.

"I first tried it my freshman year, but I didn't know what it was," Stacey said. "At the time, I was experimenting with different things -- Vicodins, Percocets, Xanax, painkillers, mushrooms, whatever was available.

"My sophomore year was when things really went downhill -- that's when heroin was all over the place in Campbell County. I was one of the earlier people into it.

"That's when I started surrounding myself with drugs and druggie people -- that's when I started getting high right before school and right after school every day."

At night, she planned how she would get money the next day to get high. Then she took a job as a waitress because the tips provided a daily source of cash for her next bag.

"Heroin was the only thing I felt I needed to live," Stacey said. "I wouldn't spend my money on any other drug."

By last summer, Stacey had gone from snorting to shooting. Her tolerance had built to the point that she couldn't afford the former.

A few weeks after DeMarrero's death, Stacey's mother got a call at work from a counselor at Campbell County High.

"He told me Stacey was having a really bad day and that we probably needed to do a drug screen," Stacey's mother said.

In another few weeks, Stacey and her parents would sign her into Kids Helping Kids.

She would not learn of Messmer's death until sometime in mid-March, more than two months after the fact. Her parents chose not to tell her; she had enough issues to deal with at the time as it was. It's also policy to steer clear of anything that would divert kids from working the program.

Stacey is eager to share her story. She wants it to be an example -- and to offer hope.

"Mark and Adam were both really good kids -- we all are," she said. "It's just something that happened, something that got bigger than we were able to control.

"But I want people to read it and see that they can get free. I know they can, because I can."

text of fax box:

Increasing use

The amount of heroin used in the United States increased by half between 1990 and 2000, according to the Office of National Drug Control Policy. The amount, in metric tons:

- Caption: photoMELVIN GRIER/The Post Leading a group session at Kids Helping Kids, a long-term drug treatment center for

adolescents 13-21, are Ben [REDACTED], Mike [REDACTED], Jayme [REDACTED] and Laura [REDACTED]

- Memo: HEROIN UPDATE text of fax box follows story

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- Memo: HEROIN UPDATE: Increasing use

• Record: 0304280150

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