



Published: October 19, 2011

Updated: October 19, 2011 - 12:00 AM

[Home](#) / [news](#) / [local](#) /

Vigil to put faces to problem of prescription drug abuse

By Joyce Mckenzie

There is a lot Michele Phillips may never know about the death of her 14-year-old son, Spencer.

But there is one thing the Valrico woman has learned for certain: prescription drugs and alcohol don't mix.

That is the message she hopes will come across loud and clear during the Light up the Night in Remembrance antidrug vigil at the Museum of Science & Industry on Oct. 27.

The event will begin with a reception in MOSI's ritual observatory at 6:30 p.m., followed by a candle-lighting ceremony at 7.

The Narcotics Overdose Prevention & Education Task Force, based in West Palm Beach, is sponsoring the vigil. The formation of a Hillsborough County chapter is under way.

The purpose of the organization is to bring more awareness of the often deadly consequences of misusing drugs by showing victims' faces and the telling of their stories by loved ones.

Tampa Police Chief Jane Castor is scheduled to be the keynote speaker.

And Phillips, a NOPE member and chairwoman of the vigil, will talk openly about how the combination of oxycontin and alcohol led to Spencer's death on June 26, 2007.

"It was ruled accidental, but as far as his taking prescription drugs, we were surprised," Phillips said.

However, she said, the typically A student's grades had dropped in the months leading up to his death and he'd begun to hang out with a group of high school-age boys in the neighborhood.

She also noted his father had at that time a bottle of liquid oxycontin he was taking because of recent shoulder surgery and there was beer in the refrigerator that Spencer could have mixed with it.



"His then-10-year-old brother, Jamie, was devastated because he looked up to Spencer," Phillips said.

Jamie, who is now 14 and wears Spencer's former number on his Bloomingdale High junior varsity football jersey, hopes to muster the courage to speak during the vigil as well.

"We're not going to hide it and we're not going to lie because raising awareness about the dangers of prescription drugs is what it is all about," Phillips said. "We think now is the time to strike."

Florida Department of Law Enforcement statistics show that in Hillsborough County, 7,492 people died of drug-related overdoses in 2010 — and 81 percent of those were related to prescription drugs.

Besides Castor, other law enforcement and community leaders also will be on hand and there will be a pre-recorded message from R. Gil Kerlikowske, director of the Office of National Drug Policy. The crowd also will be able to view a photo wall and watch a video featuring stories about teenagers who've died due to prescription drug abuse.

Guests may also check out MOSI's "Target America: Opening Eyes to the Damage Drugs Cause" that's on display at the museum, 4801 E. Fowler Ave.

Visit <http://www.nopetaskforce.org/> or call (813) 340-1862 for information.