



## D.A.R.E. Was Laughably Bad; Are New School Anti-Drug Programs Any Better?

Written by David Heitz | Published on February 27, 2015

**Two new programs, NOPE and Shatterproof, hope to use science to convince teens not to use drugs.**



It was 1986 when first lady Nancy Reagan, like a firm aunt, acknowledged America's youth had fallen prey to illegal, mind-altering drugs.

"Just say no," she told the children of the 1980s.

The idea behind the campaign, much like today's anti-bullying campaigns, was to stand up for what's right. Decline drugs when offered, "even if it makes you unpopular," she warned.

Today, critics say modern science makes Mrs. Reagan's simplistic message easy to mock.

Her hopeful approach evolved into the [Drug Abuse Resistance Education \(D.A.R.E.\)](#) program in schools nationwide.

While police officers in many communities won accolades for engaging kids in the classroom, the program in general





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was [declared unsuccessful by a number of agencies and studies](#).

A police officer speaks at a D.A.R.E. program.

Today, thousands of teens die every year from drug overdoses. The biggest culprit is [opiates](#), pain drugs that suppress the central nervous system.

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Although painkiller abuse among all Americans is down, [heroin overdoses are up](#), according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Overdoses from prescription drugs overall are also up nationwide, although they are leveling off.

Many parents of children who die from drug overdoses report their children took several drugs together in dangerous cocktail combinations, such as Adderall and alcohol.

## New Programs Take a Different Approach

Unlike the abstinence based “Just Say No” or D.A.R.E., a new approach to drug education called [NOPE](#) focuses on the problem with opiates. It has proven one of the most difficult links to break in the chain of addiction.

NOPE, or Narcotics Overdose Prevention and Education, puts together large assemblies at schools all over the United States. Students watch a multimedia presentation of parents sobbing at the funerals of their children who died from drug overdoses.

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In addition to its cornerstone video presentation, other stakeholders such as law enforcement come together at middle schools, high schools, and colleges to deliver the message that drug abusers die.

And then



there's [Shatterproof](#), which as its name implies aims to keep kids from finding their lives in pieces.

Two participants in a Shatterproof rappelling event. Credit: Shatterproof

The nonprofit was founded by a successful entrepreneur with an ambitious business plan and a large bankroll.



Shatterproof hopes to become the American Cancer Society or American Heart Association of addiction, a massive fundraising machine that brings all stakeholders to the table under one umbrella.

The program even holds events where participants rappel down the side of office buildings to help build their self-esteem.

## Acknowledging Addiction to Stamp Out Stigma

What Nancy Reagan and her campaign did do was finally admit the U.S. had a big problem with drugs. While still highly stigmatized, drug addiction is now something parents around the country are stepping forward to talk about.

They include parents like Karen H. Perry, executive director of the Florida-based NOPE Task Force, and Gary Mendell, founder of New York City-based Shatterproof.

While their approaches to the problem of drug addiction are a bit different, their stories are similar.

Both lost their sons when the boys were in their early 20s. They both told Healthline their child's drug problem began with marijuana. Both kids had used a smorgasbord of drugs. And both kids had been through treatment and had stayed clean for several months or longer.

And while some people believe a child's drug problem is usually the result of bad parenting, Perry and Mendell stand out as textbook examples of parents who tried to do all they could to raise their children right and get them help when needed.

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Palm County Sheriff's Deputy Deborah Wilson speaks to students at a NOPE presentation in Florida. Credit: NOPE

The one word both of them frequently use when they talk about their approach to teaching children is “science.”

Perry wants children to understand the science of how they can become addicted.

Mendell also wants to see scientifically proven programs to treat drug addiction be more widely implemented.

## Those First Fateful Tokes on the Golf Course

Perry, and her husband, Richard Sr., didn't know for many years that their son had a drug problem. It wasn't until his sophomore year of college that he told his parents that cocaine and alcohol had a grip on him. He reached out for help and his parents immediately got him into rehab.



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After a semester-long stay in rehab, he enrolled in a new college the following year. For about a year after rehab, he reassured his parents that he was trying hard to stay clean.

“He would look really great. He even made the Dean’s list at school,” Perry recalled. Karen H. Perry, executive director of NOPE

But unbeknownst to them, Richie had relapsed.

In fact, it turned out Richie had first used illegal drugs at the age of 15, when he and some friends played a round of golf while smoking marijuana. Soon Richie began drinking beer.

Perry said four of the five boys who spent the summer smoking pot on the golf course became addicted to drugs. Two suffered nonfatal overdoses. Richie died on June 28, 2003.

Richie had been to a hospital emergency room exactly one month before his death from an overdose. He was “brought back” with three vials of Narcon (Naloxone), a drug that reverses the depressive effect of opiates. He had overdosed on a combination of three prescribed medications and heroin.

Richie didn’t want his parents notified about the incident. Hospital officials cited [HIPAA](#) privacy rules in their decision not to release the information.

While Perry concedes it’s common practice not to inform parents when an adult child overdoses, it shouldn’t be, she argues. She points [to a clause in HIPAA](#) in which loved ones can be contacted in matters related to the survival and well being of the patient.



A person who overdoses, whether intentionally or accidentally, is facing serious and imminent threats to their health and safety, according to the [Center for Lawful Access and Abuse Deterrence](#).

### Shatterproof: Using Business Muscle to Beat Back Drugs

Now Perry is lobbying for passage of The Overdose Prevention Act in Florida, a bill that would require emergency care practitioners to notify loved ones in the event of nonfatal overdoses.

NOPE, meanwhile, has established 14 chapters in Pennsylvania and Florida and its message has reached almost 600,000 people nationwide, including 20,000 in Palm Beach County.

Prone to addiction at a young age, Richie may not have had much of a chance growing up in Palm Beach, home to notorious painkiller “pill mills.” The region has some of the highest addiction rates in the country.

Mendell’s son also died from drugs, the way he sees it, but only after a 13-month run at being sober.



Mendell’s son, who also suffered from mental illness, decided life wasn’t any better sober. He hanged himself even though he had managed to free himself from drugs. Mendell said his son used marijuana, and then progressed to Xanax, and then opiates

Shatterproof participants at an esteem-building event. Credit: Shatterproof

Mendell, a former hotel executive, brings to the fight the same tenacity as Perry, but he also has the business background of an accomplished entrepreneur. At one



time he owned a large company that managed or owned nearly four dozen hotels across the United States.

He founded Shatterproof in 2012 after resigning as head of the hotel business. He used a \$5 million contribution for seed money.

Mendell has an ambitious vision to slash in half the number of people in the U.S. who get addicted to drugs and who die from overdoses.

He also wants to halve the societal cost of addiction, estimated at more than \$416 billion per year.

After ambitious fundraising, public relations, and social media campaigns fueled by the seed money, Mendell envisions annual revenue of \$300 million by 2030 being funneled toward these goals.

## **NOPE the Beginning of a Long Road to Sobriety**

Do programs like NOPE really have a shot at success where others have failed?

Holly Vasquez-Cortella is a clinical psychologist at [Harbor Village](#), a detox center in North Miami. She told Healthline she believes NOPE, with its message directly connecting drug use to death, likely will have an impact.

*Never give up. With a lot of these kids the parent just gives up and says 'Forget it, I'm done with you.'*

Holly Vasquez-Cortella, Harbor Village Detox Center

The problem, she said, is that many parents only want to be like Perry after the fact. She has seen wealthy parents in particular send their children to the upscale detox center where she works and just expect them to come out OK regardless.





“They think we’ve got magic wands, we’ll just say, ‘OK, I’m going to fix you,’” she said.

Vasquez-Cortella says beating back addiction is hard and a child needs the relentless support of their parents.

“Never give up. With a lot of these kids the parent just gives up and says ‘Forget it, I’m done with you,’” she said.

Some parents simply don’t think, she said. She has seen parents wire their children money while they’re in rehab. She stressed those results can be disastrous and it should seem obvious it’s not a good idea.

She said the new wave of drug-addicted teens, who mix prescription drugs, marijuana, alcohol, and may even end up injecting heroin, need exactly the sort of hard wakeup call NOPE provides.