

Largo vigil remembers those who died from drugs and alcohol

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Tammie Lockwood drove her daughter to work at a Clearwater clothing store and kissed her on the cheek.

"I told her I loved her and she walked into the store, and that's the last time I seen her," said Lockwood, 44, of Pinellas Park.

The next afternoon, Lockwood learned her 20-year-old daughter, Brittany Little, had died of an unintentional overdose of alcohol, Xanax and OxyContin.

"She was a good girl. She was high-spirited. She had a lot of friends," Lockwood said. "It's heartbreaking."

That was in August 2008. On Thursday night, Lockwood joined about 300 people at Largo Central Park for Pinellas County's first Narcotic Overdose Prevention & Education Task Force vigil to remember those who lost their lives from drugs or alcohol.

Around the country, NOPE candlelight vigils drew thousands in more than 30 cities.

The local event was coordinated by Laurie Serra, who lost her stepson, Matthew, to an unintentional overdose of several drugs, including OxyContin.

Matthew Serra, who had graduated from Virginia Military Institute with dreams of becoming a military lawyer, died Oct. 3, 2008. He was 28.

"The sadness never leaves us, and we continually wonder what could have been," Serra told the crowd.

"We must stand together. We must communicate and work to bring change, in memory of those we've lost and in fear of losing others," said Serra, who worked with her husband for a state prescription drug monitoring program, which recently became law.

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Sharon Blair, who lost her 29-year-old daughter, Jennifer Reynolds Gonzalez, in January, also shared her story. Blair struggled to get help for her daughter and is working to revamp the Marchman Act, a state law that can help family members get their loved ones treatment for alcohol and substance abuse.

During the vigil, pictures of people who died from drugs and alcohol flashed on a screen.

Pinellas County Sheriff Jim Coats, one of the keynote speakers, talked about prescription drug abuse and how it has become an epidemic.

In Pinellas, drug-related deaths are the leading cause of accidental death, surpassing motor vehicle crashes.

During the first six months of this year, 103 deaths in Pinellas were attributed to prescription drugs, according to the Pinellas-Pasco Medical Examiner's Office. That figure was almost double the 57 deaths attributed to traffic wrecks in the same period.

A Florida Medical Examiners Commission report showed that, in 2008, Pinellas and Pasco counties had 209 deaths — the most statewide — linked to oxycodone. According to the report, it appears Pinellas and Pasco also lead the state in all the drug-related deaths tracked by the commission.



Dunedin High School's LiveFree! Step Team performed routines at the vigil. Safety Harbor Middle School's chorus serenaded the crowd as hundreds held flickering candles.

After the vigil, friends and family members gathered near displays where they had hung pictures of their loved ones.

"All you have left is memories," said Lockwood, eyeing a collage featuring her daughter in her senior picture, enjoying her prom and hanging out at a fun center.

Next to Lockwood, two young women, who lost their friend last year, hugged Michelle Olga Mouser as she clutched a picture of her son, Shayne Yerby-Mouser, 23, who died in April.

Minutes later, Mouser and Mark Serra shared how their sadness overwhelms them at random times. Serra told her how it happens sometimes when he drives down the road. Mouser said she had a "meltdown" at Walgreens last week.

She thought she was the only one who felt that way. She now realizes she's not alone, she said.

"Everybody here made a difference," said Mouser, 47, who lives in Dunedin