

Laying out the grim facts about drug deaths

02/05/2015 12:18PM, Published by J. Chambless



Thursday morning brought some hard lessons for students at Kennett High School. Beginning at 8 a.m., the auditorium was filled with students who came to hear a one-hour presentation by the NOPE (Narcotics Overdose Prevention and Education) task force.

Ashley Seneko talks about the heroin overdose death of her brother.

The group was invited to the school after district superintendent Barry Tomasetti, Kennett High School principal Michael Barber and social worker Kate Rentschler had seen the strong program at other schools.

Based in Florida, with chapters nationwide, NOPE confronts teens with photos of people their own ages who have died from a combination of drugs and alcohol. Each presentation features parents or loved ones who talk about those who have died. The result can be sobering, and the packed audience at Kennett sat in silence for the whole program. At the end of the first hour, several students left in tears.

The hour began with Charles Gaza, the chief of staff for the Chester County District Attorney's Office. "It's my sad job to go to the homes of those who have died of drug overdoses," he told the students. "I've been in

Chester County PRESS

too many homes where moms are crying over their dead child. Narcotics overdoses happen everywhere, in every household.”

Gaza blamed the over-prescription of painkillers, which linger in cupboards and medicine cabinets and provide a pathway to drug abuse. “Parents are their children's first drug dealer,” he said. “Prescription drugs are every bit as dangerous as illicit street drugs.

“You grow up much faster than we did, so we'll talk to you like adults,” he told the audience. “This is deadly serious.”

Megan Sensenig, a juvenile probation officer in Chester County, outlined the stories of some of the young people seen in the photos flanking the stage. “In 2013, over 60 people in Chester County died from drug overdoses,” she said. “Most were from combinations of drugs and alcohol.”

A large part of the NOPE program is to get help for those suffering an overdose, Sensenig said. Too often, teens will let a friend sleep it off, or they will be afraid of getting in trouble, so they don't tell an adult or call 911 when they see someone passed out and unresponsive. “Be the hero and tell someone,” Sensenig said.

Combining prescription drugs and alcohol is particularly risky, Sensenig said, since the substances will react unpredictably, sometimes slowing bodily functions to the point where a person simply stops breathing. “Most of these photos show people who accidentally overdosed,” Sensenig said. “They didn't want to die. But when you combine drugs and alcohol, one plus one doesn't equal two. It becomes 22.”

In a dramatic display, Sensenig asked those who knew someone who is using drugs and alcohol to stand up. Virtually every student – hundreds of

Chester County PRESS

them – stood. “Now, how many of you have tried to get help for that person?” Sensenig asked. Perhaps 20 remained standing.

Trooper Samantha Minnucci of the Pennsylvania State Police Avondale Barracks shared her frontline experiences at the scenes of drug overdoses. “Those moments haunt me,” she said. “Every one of them is a silent tragedy of missed opportunities.”

She shared the story of Aaron Fuhlbruck, 17, whose photo was displayed on the front of the podium where she stood.

“Aaron was using alcohol and prescription drugs,” Minnucci said, “and all of his friends knew. But no one decided to help him.”

Through expulsion, arrest and rehabilitation, Aaron was on a good path when he relapsed and combined Xanax and Oxycontin. A friend, who was with him, left Aaron when he passed out and locked the bedroom door. Aaron's mother got up, went to work and returned home in the afternoon when she was informed that Aaron was missing.

Minnucci stood somberly as the 911 call from Aaron's mother was played. As the 911 operator tries to get the mother to follow the standard steps, her shaking voice and cries of desperation make it clear that Aaron is beyond help.

“Can you feel her desperation – her shock?” Minnucci asked the teens in the audience after the recording ended.

She ended by holding up a body bag and closing the zipper so everyone could hear it. “This is the end result of a bad choice,” she said. “One time can kill. It is our prayer, and our hope, that all of you make the right decisions.”

Chester County PRESS

Next up was Jacki, the mother of R.J. Zwaan, who died at the age of 17 in 2008. As photos of R.J. as a child were shown behind her, she recalled that, "Life with R.J. was never boring. ... He was gifted and had ADHD and he didn't want to be different."

As R.J.'s experimentation with drugs and alcohol derailed his life, he eventually was working his way out of the worst and had a job lined up. The night before he started work, "He said, 'I love you too, mom,'" Jacki said. "That was the last thing he ever said to me."

After she discovered R.J.'s body the next morning, "I followed the ambulance to Jennersville Hospital, and I was wondering why the sirens weren't on," Jacki said. Doctors were not able to revive him.

"I had no idea he was taking pills," Jacki said. "He and I talked about everything, but we didn't talk about that. ... His viewing was three hours long," she said as a photo of R.J.'s gravestone was shown. "R.J. went to Avon Grove High School, and now four of his classmates in the class of 2012 have died. He was 17 years old on June 30, 2008. For his 18th birthday, we were waiting for his headstone to arrive. ... I died the day R.J. did, and our family will never be the same," she said.

To end the hour-long program, Ashley Seneko spoke about her brother Dennis, who died at 33 of a heroin overdose. Her voice trembling, she detailed her brother's troubled history with drug abuse, his arrest for DUI and the short imprisonment that everyone in the family thought would straighten him out. Having held a lucrative job at one point, Dennis could afford high-priced drugs. When he lost that job, he turned to cheaper, and more readily available, heroin.

"He was clean for a while, but then he moved to New Jersey for a new job," Ashley said. "He thought he was strong enough to overcome it. On Nov. 1,

Chester County PRESS

I got a Facebook message from one of his co-workers that he hadn't shown up for work.”

After police opened the door to her brother's apartment, Ashley said, they found him dead. “I thought that would be the worst day of my life,” she said. “But the day I had to pull my mother off of my brother's casket as it was being lowered into the ground – that will forever be the worst day of my life.”

While the NOPE program is designed to shock, it also reaches out. Every student got a pamphlet that explains the signs of an overdose and lists contact phone numbers that teens can call for help – for themselves or for a friend. The pamphlet lists the fact that about 70 overdose deaths occur each day in America. “Choose life first,” it reads. “All other considerations must come second!”

For more information, visit www.nopetaskforce.org.

To contact Staff Writer John Chambless, e-mail jchambless@chestercounty.com.