

DAILY LOCAL NEWS

NOPE brings anti-drug message to West Chester East

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West Goshen>> The night before 17-year-old R.J. Zwaan was scheduled to start his first day of work at a new job, he left his mother's home to go hang out with his friends.

He told his mom, Jacki Smiro, he would mow the lawn once he got home from work.

“‘I love you, too, mom,’ those were the last words he ever said to me,” Smiro recently recalled.

That night, Zwaan overdosed on a combination of prescription pills and alcohol. He died three days later on June 30, 2008.

Smiro told the story of her son's overdose to a crowd of about 100 parents gathered at East High School Thursday night for a presentation by the Narcotics Overdose Prevention Education, or NOPE, taskforce.

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The taskforce, which made presentations to all three West Chester Area School District high schools over the last two weeks, started the program in Florida 12 years ago to fight teen abuse of heroin and prescription drugs.

After the taskforce started in Delaware County, they expanded to Chester County this past year.

Jim Scanlon, superintendent of the West Chester Area School District, said Chester County lost 24 residents to heroin overdoses last year, a number that has been steadily rising.

“It’s a very powerful message for our students,” Scanlon said of the presentation. “Our guidance counselors and crisis counselors have been very busy since.”

Members of the taskforce brought out numerous pamphlets to help parents fight the battle, including pictures of different pills and their street names so parents could recognize them if they ever found their children to be in possession of them.

“It’s challenging being a parent in this day and age,” said Beth Mingey, a taskforce member and director of prevention and education at Holcomb Behavioral Health Systems.

Mingey explained to parents the signs that children who abuse drugs might display, which tended to involve any drastic changes in behavior or mood swings.

If parents believe their children are using, there are a number of ways to approach them .

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Mingey said sometimes it helps parents to remember that kids generally aren't using drugs to upset their parents.

"The kids' motivation ... is that they want to feel better," Mingey said.

Once kids start using, she said, it's just up to their brain chemistry whether they get addicted to a drug or not.

"If they don't try it, they can't become addicted," Mingey said. "Some kids — it just talks to them," Mingey said.

Mingey also spoke on the importance of parents locking up their own prescription drugs. The taskforce handed out medication logs for parents to track how often they are getting refills.

"You want to treat them like they're a loaded gun," Mingey said. "If you had a gun, you would lock it up."

Ultimately, being there is the most important thing for parents to do.

"What's the biggest defense for your kids? It's you," Mingey said. "... You are with them day in and day out. You're the biggest influence on them."