

Five Years of NOPE Candlelight Vigils

Our message has caught the attention of young people who have suffered like so many others from our nation's drug abuse problems. Many teens and young adults attended 51 NOPE vigils in late October.

By Karen Perry



At the recent NOPE National Candlelight Vigil in West Palm Beach, Fla., I shared the stage with Florida's attorney general, a former state senator, the local state attorney, a top sheriff's official, a county commissioner and a TV news anchor.

That level of support was incredible – and unimaginable when we started organizing vigils five years ago to raise awareness about substance abuse and open the doors to recovery.

Just as powerful for me on that Oct. 27th evening, though, was being among the young people.

The few dozen teenagers and young adults sitting in chairs and stands in the pavilion was the reason we created the vigil in Palm Beach County, as well as in dozens of other places across the nation. Like so many other Americans, our youths are deeply impacted by the drug overdose epidemic. They too have lost loved ones and close friends.



Still, studies show that many middle school, high school and college students aren't too concerned about experimenting with powerful pain medications. Too many young people aren't clear about the potentially deadly consequences of mixing prescription pills with alcohol and illicit drugs.

That's the perception our vigils are trying to change.

We started the vigils with just three sites: Palm Beach County, Fla., Orlando, Fl., and Lassen County, Calif. I still remember getting a call from the organizer in Lassen County who was in tears about the success of the first vigil. The moon was beautiful that night – and we both saw it from opposite coasts in the U.S. That same year, in 2007, the federal drug enforcement agent who investigated my son's fatal drug overdose case spoke at the vigil at University of Central Florida.

The following year, we expanded the vigils to New Hampshire, Indiana and Martin County, Fla. And the events, held during the last week of October in conjunction with Red Ribbon Week, grew from there.

This year, 51 communities organized vigils.



Along the way, we got big names like the nation's drug czar Gil Kerlikowske and Florida's Attorney General Pam Bondi to speak at our West Palm Beach vigils. They came because they believed in our message: it's time to change perceptions that the disease of addiction is deserved and shameful.

Attorney General Bondi said it best during the most recent vigil: "When it comes to addiction, there is no place to blame. There's only a place to love."

I couldn't agree more. Hopefully our young people understood that message as well. By coming to the vigil, I suspect they did.

If you value NOPE Task Force's commitment to preventing drug overdoses, please consider a voluntary payment to support the organization. Donate at www.nopetaskforce.org/donations.asp.

Karen Perry is the executive director of NOPE Task Force.