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Program, vigil call attention to drug overdose fatalities

By Stephen Thompson

Susan Korabek remembers well the afternoon when she walked into the bedroom of her 17-year-old son, Landon, and found him sitting on his bed, his head tilted back, the television on and his cellphone in his lap.

He was dead, from a mixture of Xanax and Vicodin, and it might have been his first dalliance with prescription drugs, Korabek told a cafeteria full of students at Azalea Middle School on Wednesday morning.

Emily Helmintoller remembers, too. Her brother, Davis, 23, who long had battled addiction, was staying with her when he decided to drink beer and take prescription drugs, she told the students.

Seven years earlier, Davis, then 16, was found in a bathroom unconscious at the family home, but he survived that ordeal. This time, there was no oxygen mask placed over his mouth as he was whisked out on a stretcher. This time, Helmintoller told the students, her brother was taken away in a body bag.

The two women told their stories as part of a presentation by NOPE, which stands for Narcotics Overdose Prevention and Education. Tonight, the organization, in conjunction with the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office, will hold its third annual candlelight vigil to remember those who have died from drug and alcohol abuse.

The vigil in Pinellas will be at 7 p.m. at Largo Central Park. There also will be a NOPE vigil at 7 p.m. in Hillsborough County at the Museum of Science & Industry.

The stories of Landon Korabek and Davis Helmintoller were aimed, in part, at illustrating that the first-time user and the addict can die from prescription drugs. As Laurie Serra, NOPE's Pinellas County coordinator, told the students, "It doesn't take addiction to die."

"One time, one pill can kill," she said. And, a Pinellas deputy told the kids, "that pill may not be what they told you it was."

Another goal of the demonstration was to instruct the seventh- and eighth-graders to recognize the symptoms of overdose — from hallucination to snoring — and act immediately by calling 911.

Serra and Pinellas school resource officer Ural Darling spoke of several incidents where teens died because their friends weren't aware of the seriousness of what was going on or were afraid to do anything for fear they would get in trouble.