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Sebastian candlelight vigil spreads awareness of drugs' dangers to children

By Janet Begley

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SEBASTIAN — Sebastian resident Renee Hazien knows all too well the pain of losing a child to drugs. And now she wants to make sure the same thing doesn't happen to other parents.

Hazien was in Sebastian's Riverview Park on Thursday night for a candlelight vigil sponsored by the Narcotics Overdose Prevention and Education (NOPE) Task Force.

About 50 people attended the vigil, which co-sponsored by the Indian River County Sheriff's Office.

In 2009, 35 people died in Indian River County from a drug overdose -- more than the total number of people who died in car crashes, homicides and suicides combined. Many of these accidental deaths were the result of mixing prescription pills with alcohol, cocaine and other drugs, vigil organizer Lumaine Owens said.

"The problem of drug abuse touched my family," said Owens, a shift supervisor for the Sheriff's Office for 25 years. "Since I didn't have the knowledge I needed, I went on the Internet and I found out about the NOPE program. I hope that the vigil will be the start of something we do every year."

Owens said that similar vigils take place in more than 50 cities nationwide, and are designed to remember those who are suffering with drug addiction.

"I think that people just close their eyes to it," Owens said. "People are scared to talk about addiction so they don't seek the treatment they need as quickly as they should."

Hazien's 23-year-old son, Adam, died from an accidental overdose of Oxycontin and Xanax last year, and she is determined to spread the word about the dangers of drug usage.

"I want to make each and every person aware of the prescription drug problem," Hazien said. "It's killing our children."

Detective Bill Staar, a detective with the Multi Agency Crime Enforcement Unit of the Sheriff's Department, said that addiction to prescription drugs is rampant in Indian River County.

"Last year, I investigated one death every 12 days," said Staar. "The pills have taken over."

Sheriff Deryl Loar said events like Thursday's vigil shine a light on the problem of addiction, and create a community awareness of the problem.

"This is an epidemic," said Loar. "There's not a day that goes by that we don't talk about the fighting the deadly problem of prescription drugs in Indian River County."



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