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Parents share struggles with children abusing drugs

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ORANGE CITY -- With a picture of her son displayed on a stand next to her, Victoria McGuirk struggled to hold back tears Thursday as she described the transformation of a bright, happy boy into a man gripped by drug addiction, a habit that eventually led to Matt McGuirk's untimely death at age 31.

She told his story during a presentation aimed at helping parents understand drug addiction given by Narcotics Overdose Prevention & Education (NOPE) of Volusia/Flagler Counties at University High School.

The event was attended by a handful of parents, including Orange City Mayor Tom Laputka, who shared his experiences with two of his four sons who have struggled with drug abuse.

"I get up at 3 a.m. on occasion and go feel for a pulse, to see if they're still alive," he said. "Never thought I'd live like that."

He described how one of his sons, a U.S. Army veteran who served in Afghanistan, is in denial about his drug problem.

"He's not doing well. He's medicating himself," he said. "How do you talk to a guy that has been doing the things that he's been doing?"

On a more positive note, another of his sons has been getting treatment at a facility in Jacksonville. Laputka described him as being on the road to recovery and doing well. In the past, both sons had their share of legal issues.

Laputka said he has been candid about his sons' struggles with drug addiction in the hopes that someone else would possibly be helped.

It's too late for Matt McGuirk, however, and that's what motivated his mother to get involved and speak out.

As a child, he was sexually abused by a teacher. He never dealt with the resulting trauma fully, according to Victoria McGuirk, and as a teenager, that led him into drug use

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While he had some brief successes and even started his own group to speak out to others about his past, he died in 2011 in an area hotel room of an accidental drug overdose -- a fatal combination of cocaine and methadone were in his system, Victoria McGuirk said.

She said it was later discovered Matt had four prescriptions filled four days before his death – for a total of about 315 pills — from a doctor who'd been recently arrested.

In the past, Florida was a major source for widely abused painkillers, earning the nickname "the oxy express" after the drug oxycontin. Laws were passed in 2010 to combat the "pill mills" that prescribed such drugs illicitly; however, issues remain.

All the speakers Thursday emphasized that drug abuse, particularly among young people, is an epidemic. Teens are trying -- and becoming addicted to -- prescription pills and illicit drugs at record rates, and it's having disastrous consequences.

In 2011 alone, there were 83 accidental drug overdose deaths in Volusia County, while Flagler County lost 18 people to overdoses.

The message from the presentation was clear: trying drugs even once can put someone at risk of overdose, especially when drugs are taken in combinations.

"One time can kill. Just one use," said Lisa Huser, a certified addiction specialist, registered nurse and NOPE member.

Huser focused her portion of the presentation on helping parents identify the signs of drug abuse and talking with their children about the issue. Signs can include sudden changes in behavior, appearance, hygiene, or changes in their attitude toward drugs, she said.

She urged parents to lock up all prescription medications and dispose of those no longer needed. Most importantly, she encouraged parents to communicate openly and honestly with their children.

The event was led by Linda Parkin, program coordinator for NOPE of Volusia/Flagler. In addition to McGuirk, Huser and Parkin, speakers included Officer Joseph Sellix of the Daytona Beach Police Department and Sgt. Eugene Griffith of the New Smyrna Beach Police Department.

In the past, NOPE has also put on presentations aimed at students at schools around the area.

For more information on drug abuse or to learn the signs and symptoms of drug use in a child, visit www.nopetaskforce.org