

A New Look At an Old Drug

Contributed by Dagmar Fors Karppi
Friday, 26 February 2010 00:00

Heroin: Teen's Drug of Choice

Today's image of a heroin addict is no longer an unkempt, dirty loser with needlemarks on their arm, but a smiling, smart teenage Prom Queen. That was the message to parents and teens attending a heroin forum, "Not My Child" presented by Kristin M. Fexas, deputy bureau chief from District Attorney Kathleen Rice's office as she spoke in the St. Dominic High School auditorium recently. Ms. Fexas explained the need to take a decisive stand against the drug merchants.

Ms. Fexas said, "They are smart people and are taking advantage of their knowledge of young people to attract them to try drugs." They are creating heroin packaging to entice youngsters by dispelling any wariness so that they reach for the designer symbols that are part of their culture."

She said today's heroin dealer is a businessman who uses marketing strategies to reach his customers who are 15 to 28 years old – and are brand conscious. Additionally, there is a stigma to drugs that have to be injected, and people today associate needles with HIV and AIDS – therefore today's product can be snorted or smoked. Today's heroin is purer.

The dealers put labels on their small packets like "The American Gangster", "Top Hat", and "Flames"; and for girls "Prada". There is even an "Obama" label, she said. "Whatever they think that group would be interested in to make them buy, is used."

About 150 parents and teens attended the forum, which included Nora Ammirati, a paralegal in the D.A.'s office who gave personal testimony about her son who is battling drug addiction.

The women were introduced by St. Dominic High School Principal Denise Smith. Ms. Smith said she attended a similar forum at Oyster Bay High School and asked her staff to arrange for the women to speak at St. Dominic's.

"As far as we know we don't have a heroin problem in St. Dominic's but, however, we are not sure and we owe it to the children and the parents to inform them," said Principal Smith.

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Barbara Rakusin, Youth and Family Counseling Agency of Oyster Bay-East Norwich executive director, also attended the heroin forum held at the Oyster Bay High School. She said recently there were two local drug arrests: one in the East Norwich shopping center parking lot and one in the Rite Aid parking lot. "Heroin is here in Oyster Bay – but not only that – all opiate use. The problem here is a little less than other areas of Nassau County, but it is certainly larger than it was," she said.

Today, YFCA has about 50 people in their drug and alcohol treatment program who range from age 16 through 60. Today they are finding more senior citizens who have been addicted before, or who have become addicted as they age, so they have several people at about age 50 in the program.

"This is a society where drinking is not frowned upon," she said. Addiction doesn't care about socio-economics, race or age and there is a growing older population that is addicted.

Ms. Rakusin said, "There is heroin addiction in Oyster Bay – in all ages. In kids as young as 15 and people in their 30s and 40s. If they are already addicted to opiate pills, the heroin is cheaper."

She said the heroin discussion at the Oyster Bay High School Library had a room full of listeners – primarily parents. "The program was done well. I was glad that Phyllis (Harrington, OBEN Superintendent of Schools) had it," she said.

Ms. Rakusin is also pleased that YFCA now has a doctor on staff. "Our new doctor can provide treatment for opiate addiction, Suboxone. It is a treatment for all opiates including heroin. It allows us to provide care for anyone with an opiate addiction in our clinic, where we can provide the medicine and the treatment for drug abuse, too. It is not enough to get a drug addict to stop; they really need the tools to stay sober and drug free. Maintenance is harder so you need a drug program to give them the tools," she said. [To reach out to the YFCA programs please call 922-6867.]

Beer and a Bong

At the St. Dominic forum, Chief Fexas said, "Children need to be aware of the choices they make. None of us are perfect but some mistakes have more tragic consequences than others."

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She said people don't start on heroin, but that drug abuse starts with addictive behavior and alcohol. Before they are 21 when it is legal to buy beer, they have a beer at a party, or at a celebration. From there they go to "beer and marijuana" or a "beer and a bong."

"Cocaine use has not gone away," said Ms. Fexas, "It is still alive and well but it is not the drug of choice for young people. Their first steps into drug use is prescription drugs."

She asked, "How many pill bottles do you have at home? How many of you have the cabinets locked? 'None'," she answered. "Those pills are just as dangerous as a loaded hand gun. You keep gun ammunition in a locked box and out of reach to prevent a tragic accident." She said most people have leftover pain killers in their home from prescriptions from past surgeries. She explained that they are opiates and said a young person doesn't just say, "I'm going to shoot up with heroin and become a heroin addict – they say they are never going to use heroin but see their parents with pills. Taking pills is not seen as dirty and dangerous as is getting crack on the streets."

Buying pills on the streets can cost \$50 each – they pay \$1 a milligram for pills. It's easy for college students to go to their home medicine cabinet and take/steal pills. They put them into a candy dish for a "Pill Party." (It was called "cow tipping" but now it is called a "Pharm Party," a term she said to be aware of.)

The bowl of pills is a colorful mix and they take a combination of them without knowing what the effects will be. They realize that their parents might not notice their pill supply being depleted.

Going out on the street to buy pills, at a cost of \$50 a pill, is very expensive and in comparison the heroin is cheaper, they can be as low as \$4 to \$12 a packet. They are often about \$7 to \$8, a lot easier to get that amount of money, than for one pill at \$50.

Crystal Meth

Luckily, said Ms. Fexas, crystal meth has not been a problem in Nassau County in the last two years. There have been arrests for possession growing in Suffolk County and in NYC. "We are sandwiched in – so be aware," she said.

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She showed a photograph of a woman who had been on crystal meth for six months and said you can see a weight loss; wrinkles; her complexion doesn't look good.

The stereotypical heroin addict is dirty, gaunt - haunts dark alleys and has track marks on their arms and it's easy to say "stay away," she said.

Not so with the new users of heroin. She showed a Prom picture of Natalie Ciappa who is symbolic of the tragedy of heroin and who died of an overdose at age 18. She was a full-fledged heroin addict. She never injected heroin. She had had an overdose two weeks before the one that killed her. She said Natalie's mother spoke of her experience of having a heroin-addicted child who was healthy, beautiful and smart and had died of an overdose. Ms. Ciappa said they were trying to get her therapy or into rehab but she was 18 and you can't force an 18-year-old, by law, to do something. Ironically, at the same time the law says they can't buy alcohol until they are 21. Natalie had a 113 GPA; had a brilliant voice and when she sang the national anthem she gave people chills. Her parents thought, "This is the kid we don't have to worry about - who was smart and knew better." Natalie's journey with heroin took 10 months from start to finish - with a tragic ending.

Family Trauma

Nora Ammirati, a paralegal for an assistant attorney in the D.A.'s Drug Treatment alternative office, told of her family's roller coaster ride dealing with her son's heroin addiction. Her son Philip has been a heroin addict since he was 20. She showed a picture of him earlier and happy, next to a 2008 mug shot. His heroin addiction started with oxycoton that he got from a friend who got it from a grandparent's medicine cabinet. "It has been a nightmare," she said. She read a letter she sent to him when he was in jail. She told him she loved him; but was hurt, angry and disappointed and filled with grief.

"I miss my wonderful boy - the gentle giant. I've been crying for three years," she said. She said he changed the whole family. "You said you were going to be clean and I was so happy. I can't tell you how I feel to leave a child outside hungry and dirty and to have to call the police."

Ms. Ammirati said they considered selling their house and leaving the area. "It is worse than cancer or death - I lost my son."

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She wrote, “I’m not coming to the jail – that depressing place. You’ve promised me before and then comes the heartache. You have to promise to be clean.”

She said there were thefts at home; he called his drug dealer with their phone. She said she would always love him but would not be in his life. She said to him, “Do the work. You have the intelligence to do it.” She said she stuck to her word and he has gone into a drug program. It was a year last August and he was an outpatient. “He did some presentations with us,” she said.

“Then two days before Christmas he relapsed, but he is back in a treatment program. This is real. I work for law enforcement and work with addicts – with young people. I remember hearing this – if you use opiates you will be in for a life-changing experience,” she said.

Ms. Fexas said she has heard Nora speak about 100 times and she sees how people’s hearts go out to her, “But I still see a disconnect. People saying – ‘But that is them and it’s the south shore.’ So we have tried to come up with a scenario everyone can relate to,” she said.

Pushing Boundaries

She said youngsters keep trying to test their boundaries saying they want to stay over at their friends homes, that it is a special occasion and a precedent is set; and then comes Valentine’s Day and a Sweet 16 Prom and a reason to go shopping for a dress – and slowly they extend their curfews. There are after-party parties; time to open gifts; breakfast at a friends house. “You know Sally,” they say and keep begging.

She showed a slide of a girl passed out on a table and she told two possible stories about it. “Everyone knows of a girl – she was all washed out after the party. Outside the frame of the picture her friends are watching. They bring her to their home; she has breakfast and goes home; and her parents never know. On the other hand, she might not wake up. Her heart might have stopped and she has died. The parents are called to the morgue to identify her and they find out that she died at a house party.

“Then the kids have to deal with the results, coping with the loss of one of their own friends – seeing the empty seat in class. The reality is that those friends go on to college and the girl who OD’s is all but forgotten. There is nothing glamorous about ODing and dying. People are

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saddened but the person's life is gone and forgotten," she said.

Rising Numbers

What brought all this to the attention of the DA in 2006 was the statistics on death by violence compared to deaths by drugs.

Death by violence – murder: In 2006 there were 22; 2007 there were 27; 2008 there were 30 and in 2009 there were 23 and the figures were not all in.

Death by heroin: In 2004 there were 24 heroin deaths; in 2005 there were 38; in 2006 there were 37; in 2007 there were 27; in 2008 there were 46; and in 2009 there were 25 for the first six months.

In January of 2006, DA Rice decided to spend her resources in fighting heroin. She was told it was a growing problem and wondered who does heroin anymore, so they looked at the issue. The medical examiner said there was a more than 50 percent increase; so in 2006 after a lot of detective work, they arrested between 20 to 25 people who were using the Hempstead bus terminal to bring drugs in from Brooklyn.

They thought they had stopped the problem after the arrests, but although there were a few less deaths the next year, the figures are on the upswing again. She said in 2008, there were 46 deaths and between Thanksgiving and New Year's Eve, five of them took place. "It should be the happiest time of the year and four of the five were under 24," said Ms. Texas.

She told the story of some of the drug dealers arrested to show how long their prison sentences were in comparison to what amount of drugs they were caught dealing with. Pat Graf went to prison for four years, for selling 70 bundles of drugs. Donald Kurtl got three and a half years for selling 60 bundles of drugs. The bundles are about the size of a wallet and about 1 ½ inches thick.

Alex Fontanet and Edward Fontanet got eight and seven years respectively for selling three bricks of uncut heroin. Dennis Ingenito of Seaford was selling drugs in a rehab center while he

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was in a drug treatment program – looking for new customers. He was re-arrested and got 10 years.

Joseph Buonicountri, a drugs and gun dealer, got 10 years.

They recently arrested a heroin and cocaine dealer in Roslyn Heights. “They are everywhere,” she said. They find the drugs everywhere: in the top or bottom of cars; inside tires.

She alerted parents to look for a soda can or ice tea can that seems to be hanging around the house for a while. “Shake them to make sure they are real,” she said. They are a place youngsters hide items like drugs.

Ms. Fexas showed a picture of a young woman outside of a Dunkin’ Donuts, slumped over on the steps. A policeman saw her and called an ambulance and her response was that she was furious saying, “How dare they interrupt her heroin high.” She was found in the middle of the night in a parking lot and wasn’t being cooperative about her rescue or concerned about her vulnerability in that setting, said Ms. Fexas.

She said a Hicksville man, Edward Plakstis, was arrested and pleaded guilty to injecting an intoxicated friend with heroin because he wanted to be “higher”. He was given 1 and a half to 4 years in prison.

Signs of Drug Abuse

Parents were alerted to signs to look for to recognize drug addiction: missing money; missing prescription drugs; a change in eating habits; weight loss or gain; schoolwork performance; apathy or extreme emotion; changed sleep patterns; nodding off at the dinner table; not making eye contact; a loss of hygiene; a change of friends. If they are in the middle of a heroin high or a withdrawal they can be seen scratching; having chills and nausea.

They can nod off in mid-sentence for a moment and teens will give the excuse that it’s early classes or a part-time job that is tiring them, but that is just a sign that it is time to find out what is happening.

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Her suggestions were, “Meet and get to know your children’s friends by having a conversation with them.”

Today, young people are turning to email, texting, tweeting and Facebook, but she said, “Get back to conversations.”

She added, insist kids come to the front door before letting your child get into a car. “Letting them honk the horn for your child to hop in the car is a mistake. It is not to be done. They should come to the door and chat, say hello. You can ask that whoever the driver is will not drink. Look for slurring speech; blood-shot eyes so that you can have peace of mind.

“At least then, you can describe the guy to the police,” she said.

Also listen to the words used by your teens and ask them what they mean. There is a website for words the young people use called noslang.com. “Insist they speak properly,” she said.

And, “Trust your instincts. Don’t assume anything. Everyone falls under peer pressures,” she said.

You can also create an environment where teens can hang out, but be sure to be the kind of parent that checks things out every few minutes – like doing laundry slowly. “You can’t give teens the feeling they have the run of the basement or they will feel comfortable to drink and experiment with drugs,” she said.

She gave the number of the Drug and Alcohol hotline, 739-6666 where people can make anonymous calls. The Nassau County Drug and Alcohol Hotline is 481-4000.

Ms. Fexas also said to look at facebook.com. She said kids put on things they don’t want you to know but that the whole world can see. The thing is, those items will remain in the system forever, she said.