



## **TAKING ON THE HEROIN “PLAGUE”**

### **Parents 4 A Change is Starting to Raise Awareness**

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SOUTHINGTON -- Before his 18-year-old daughter died of a heroin overdose in January 2007, Dave DuBois was like many parents – unaware of the seemingly unstoppable grip heroin can have on a person and ignorant to the drug’s availability.

“I think of my daughter every day,” DuBois said. “I have a lot of guilt that I didn’t protect her, save her, and I don’t wish that feeling on anyone.”

DuBois and other members of Parents 4 A Change have challenging and lofty, yet simple, goals: to raise awareness of and education about opiate abuse among teens in Southington, and ensure no other parents endure the pain of losing a child. At least four Southington teens have died from drug-related causes in the last two years and the most recent death was less than two months ago.

“A lot of parents don’t take this issue seriously, and they won’t until they lose someone,” DuBois said. “But it doesn’t have to be that way.”

Parents 4 A Change faced opposition from some community members upon its formation a year-and-a-half ago. The group, however, pressed on.

“We like this town and we care about this town,” said Mary Marcuccio, one of the group’s founders and its spokesperson. “Our goal is to protect our homes from this drug, and maintenance, in the form of recognizing and combating this problem, is required.”

Despite its rocky beginnings, Parents 4 A Change is now gaining local and national traction. More than 70 people filled the YMCA’s all-purpose room Friday evening for the group’s public meeting, and Good Morning America plans to showcase the group’s efforts on national television later this week.

Friday’s public meeting featured three distinguished speakers – Wayne Kowal of the statewide narcotics task force, Rahim Shafa, a doctor from Massachusetts who specializes in clinical psychopharmacology and has developed a new opiate addiction treatment, and School Superintendent Joseph V. Erardi Jr.

Kowal gave an overview of current drug use trends in Connecticut and said heroin has “far surpassed cocaine as the state’s greatest drug threat.” He said the drug is popular among younger users because of its low cost and high purity.

Some of the most common side effects of heroin, Kowal said, are a euphoric state, itchy skin, constriction of the pupils and sweating, while some of the drug’s most harmful health hazards include infection of the heart’s lining and valves, liver disease and risk of contracting HIV or Hepatitis C through shared needle use.

Missing spoons are an easy, reliable way to detect heroin usage in the home, Kowal said. Users employ spoons to cook heroin before injecting the drug.

“To the mothers or whoever runs the kitchen in your house, count your spoons every day because they will start disappearing,” Kowal said. “You’d never even think to do that, but you need to.”

Shafa briefed meeting attendees on naltrexone, an FDA-approved drug for treatment of alcohol addiction that is reportedly an effective treatment for opiate dependence. The drug can be injected or surgically implanted in a patient’s fat tissue using a time-release pellet.

“This drug enters the body and sits on the brain imitating the opiate for the brain’s receptors,” Shafa said. “Because this drug sits on the brain and sits tight, it won’t allow the opiate to sit there, too. If a user shoots heroine, [he or she] won’t get high. Instead, the brain will reject the heroin and the user will feel very sick.”

Shafa and Dr. Lance Goberman of New Jersey are the only two doctors currently offering naltrexone in pellet form.

“Noncompliance is like the plague,” said Shafa of recovering addicts who choose not to take other opiate addiction drugs prescribed by doctors in pill form. “With the shot or the pellet, the addict has no choice.”

Erardi offered final remarks to close the public meeting and described snapshots of his involvement with Parents 4 A Change over the last year. One such moment took place in May, when Erardi brought group members into Southington High School to discuss opiate addiction among teens with the students.

“I watched the students listen to parents speak who had lost their children, and I saw how connected the students were to their words,” Erardi said.

He added that he is proud of the group for galvanizing around an issue and saying its OK to discuss how to combat heroin use in town.

“This group rolled up its sleeves and said, we don’t want to lose another kid,” Erardi said. “Other communities will now look to Southington not as ‘Oh my goodness, look what happened to that town,’ they will look and say ‘Look what they’re doing to address this deadly problem.’”

Factoid

Red Flags of Opiate Abuse

- Missing change and money
- Missing jewelry and valuables of resale quality
- Pupils that look like pinpoints
- Drastic weight loss
- Tiny, black elastic bands
- Disassembled pens
- Small, empty wax or plastic baggies